

interzone

interzone

NEW SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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Her Scientifiction, Far Future, Medieval Fantasy

Jason Sanford

plus other new stories by

Suzanne Palmer

Lavie Tidhar

Will McIntosh

Jon Ingold

art

Richard Wagner & Mark Pexton

news

David Langford's *Ansible Link*

book & film reviews

Tony Lee's *Laser Feltzer*Nick Lowe's *Mutant Possum*

Book Zone



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This issue we bring you the results of the Readers' Poll. Congratulations to artist Richard Wagner who had two of his illustrations tie for first place, and to Jason Sanford (for the third year running) and Nina Allan for sharing top spot for their stories 'Plague Birds' and 'Flying in the Face of God'. Thanks to Martin McGrath for once again overseeing the poll, and to everyone who voted and commented. Turn out was down this year by the way, so we must do something to prevent that from becoming a trend...

You'll find a new story from Jason in this issue, and he's hard at work on a series of sequels to 'Plague Birds', the first of which – 'The Ever-Dreaming Verdict of Plagues' – is already lined up for a near future issue, illustrated by the great Jim Burns.

Congratulations also to Alette de Bodard, whose *Interzone* story 'The Shipmaker' won the BSFA Award, presented at Eastercon (below). Nina Allan's 'Flying in the Face of God' was also on the shortlist for that award, and if you liked that story, and 'The Silver Wind' from last issue (plus any number from *Black Static* and *The Third Alternative* before it), please allow me to remind you that she has 'Wilkolak' – a masterpiece – in our sister publication *Crimewave 11: Ghosts*, out now.

Talking of *Crimewave 11*, congratulations and good luck to Richard Butler, whose novelette 'Holderhaven' from the same anthology has been shortlisted for a Shirley Jackson Award "for outstanding achievement in the literature of psychological suspense, horror, and the dark fantastic". The awards will be presented at Readercon 22 in Burlington, Massachusetts, in July.



Alette de Bodard with her BSFA Award – photo by Roy Gray

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As Others See Us. Better to be forgotten than remembered in the wrong way by the wrong people: 'Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin must be so proud: The anniversary of his embarking on the first human space flight on April 12, 1961, is celebrated by sci-fi lovers the world over with alt-astro costumes, drink specials, funk bands, and burlesque shows.' (*Washington Post*)

George R.R. Martin became highly visible thanks to the TV *A Game of Thrones*: he's in the 2011 'Time 100' list of Earth's most influential people. An *Independent* interview feature, after likening him to 'a very friendly hobbit', confirmed that bitchy comments still rankle: 'There's nothing wrong with fans speculating about what's going to happen, but it's annoying when they suggest that I won't finish it, or say there's no chance of the new book coming out. I find it downright offensive when people say things like, "I hope he doesn't pull a Jordan". I was friends with Jim [Jim Rigney, i.e. Robert Jordan] ... no one wants to die before finishing their work. Anyone who uses that phrase "pull a Jordan" is an asshole.' (*Independent*) He's since finished book 5, *A Dance with Dragons*.

Awards

Arthur C. Clarke: Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City*. **BSFA:** Novel: Ian McDonald, *The Dervish House*. Short: Alette de Bodard, 'The Shipmaker' (*Interzone* #231). Art: Joey Hi-Fi, cover of *Zoo City*. Nonfiction: Paul Kincade, 'Blogging the Hugos: Decline' (*Big Other*).

Philip K. Dick: Mark Hodder, *The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack*.

DnA (Dave's nAnarchy) Award for weird sf in any medium, first presentation: K.W. Jeter, *Dr Adder*.

Horror Writers Association, Lifetime Achievement: Ellen Datlow, Al Feldstein.

James Tiptree Jr (gender exploration): Dubravka Ugresic, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*. **SF Hall of Fame:** Vincent Di Fate, Gardner Dozois, Harlan Ellison, Moebius.

Magazine Scene. *New Worlds* will relaunch as *Michael Moorcock's New Worlds* this autumn under the aegis of the Daves Dream Company (Dick Jude and others) created to run the above-mentioned DnA award in memory of Paul 'Gamma' Gamble.

Without Comment. A 'Sci-Fi and Fantasy Friendly Church Service' near Melbourne, encouraging fans to come in costume and hear moral lessons from *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Doctor Who*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Star Wars*, was frowned on by a rival pastor: "I don't have a problem with people enjoying sci-fi, but church isn't the place to encourage escapism and fancy dress," Mentone Baptist minister Murray Campbell said.' (*Herald Sun*, Australia)

Hugo Shortlists (selected). Novel:

Connie Willis, *Blackout/All Clear*; Lois McMaster Bujold, *Cryoburn*; Ian McDonald, *The Dervish House*; Mira Grant, *Feed*; N.K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. • Dramatic, long: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows I*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Inception*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, *Toy Story 3*. • Semiprozine: *Clarkesworld*, *Interzone*, *Lightspeed*, *Locus*, *Weird Tales*.

James Cameron, interviewed by sf enthusiast James Murdoch at the Abu Dhabi Media Summit, couldn't resist quoting the first response of Murdoch senior's Fox film studio executives to his proposal for *Avatar*: 'Is there any way to reduce this tree-hugging hippy crap?' (*Independent*)

Stephen Hunt was enraged by the BBC's World Book Night *Culture Show* special on 'The Books We Really Read', covering popular fiction but nevertheless not discussing a single work of sf, fantasy or horror. His petition of protest was signed by 85 genre authors; the BBC's ingenious

response was that they'd mentioned that doyenne of space opera, Margaret Atwood...

As Others See Us II. 'As shown by *Battle: Los Angeles*, and hordes of films before it, science fiction is nothing if not mockable. [...] Science fiction is so inherently close to the absurd that the toughest challenge is not to lampoon it' (Anthony Lane, *New Yorker*)

R.A. Lafferty's entire literary estate is for sale, according to a *Locus* ad offering 'Exclusive Rights to Publish His 29 Novels and 229 Short Stories ... Current bid is \$70,000.'

Peter Watts had a horrific encounter with necrotizing fasciitis resulting from a routine biopsy, lost a great deal of flesh from one leg, and gleefully placed the quease-inducing photographic evidence on his website.

Kazuo Ishiguro, though not an sf denialist, still has misgivings: 'In truth, the sci-fi label is misleading. I'm just wary like everybody else that it'll bring in the wrong audience with the wrong expectations.' (*Herald*) Perhaps he fears being mobbed by fans dressed as Klingons or Darth Vader.

Laura J. Mixon is now writing sf as M.J. Locke.

Iain Banks is a tourist attraction in VisitScotland's latest guide to literary Scotland: 'Iain Banks (b.1954), novelist, author of numerous sensational works combining fluent storytelling, political engagement and moral indignation, and many science fiction novels.' At least the sf isn't sensational.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Health & Safety*. 'But he shrugged it aside, since no danger from any outside source could possibly exist in Space' (Murray Roberts, *The Flying Globes*, 1939) • *Hirsute Dept*. 'In the center was a quiet commanding man whose brown beard was only slightly gray at the temples...' (Gerald Morris, *The Legend of the King*, 2010) • *1 Eyeballs in the Sky*. 'His huge eyes always looked as if they were about to rip somebody apart...' (Jack Chalker, *Gods of the Well of Souls*, 1994) • *Dept of Alfresco Dessert*. 'He turned suddenly to attend to some trifle on his horse' (Mary Robinette Kowal, *Shades of Milk and Honey*, 2010)

R.I.P.

Bill Blackbeard (1926–2011), noted US comics scholar and collector who saved vast numbers of newspaper strips from destruction by libraries converting their archives to microfilm, died on 10 March aged 84.

April Derleth (1954–2011), August Derleth's daughter and President/CEO of genre publisher Arkham House, died on 21 March aged 56.



▲ **Diana Wynne Jones** (1934–2011) died in a hospice in the early hours of 26 March; she was 76. Her death was no surprise – every extra week had been a bonus since she ceased chemotherapy last summer – but nevertheless dismaying news for the great many people who loved her work and Diana herself. As a children's and YA author, she was quite simply the best; and no writer of equivalent stature was so much fun to be with. After three plays and the comic adult novel *Changeover* (1970), her long run of fantasies began with *Wilkins' Tooth* (1973) and continued to *Enchanted Glass* (2010), with a further fantasy and a nonfiction collection to come; highlights en route included the Dalemank quartet, the Chrestomanci sequence beginning with *Charmed Life* (1977), *Fire and Hemlock* (1985), *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986, filmed by Miyazaki) and *Deep Secret* (1997). Her mock travel book *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996) ruthlessly spoofed fantasy clichés; and then *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* (1998) imagined the comic

agonies of living in just such a theme-park Fantasyland. Her many honours include the World Fantasy Award for life achievement. We were all hugely lucky to have Diana, and to have her work still.

H.R.F. Keating (1926–2011), prolific UK detective novelist and critic whose sf comprises *The Strong Man* (1971) and *A Long Walk to Wimbledon* (1978), died on 27 March; he was 84.

L.K. Madigan (Lisa Kay Wolfson), US YA novelist whose *The Mermaid's Mirror* (2010) is fantasy, died on 23 February; she was 47.

John Nettleship, who as J.K. Rowling's former chemistry teacher was the original inspiration for Severus Snape, died on 12 March aged 71. He was an enthusiastic Hogwarts fan, author of the nonfiction *Harry Potter's Chepstow*.

Joanna Russ (1937–2011), US academic, author and critic renowned for passionate, clear-sighted and often very funny feminist writing (both fiction, notably her 1975 *The Female Man*, and nonfiction), died on 29 April; she was 74. She won a Nebula for her *Again, Dangerous Visions* story 'When It Changed' (1972), Hugo and *Locus* awards for 'Souls' (1982), two retro-Tiptrees, and the 1988 Pilgrim award for sf criticism.



▲ **Elisabeth Sladen** (1948–2011), UK actress most famed and loved as Sarah Jane Smith in the Pertwee/Baker era of *Doctor Who* (1973–1976) – a role reprised in her spinoff series *The Sarah Jane Adventures* (2007–2010) – died from cancer on 19 April. She was 63.

Craig Thomas (1942–2011), Welsh author of 18 novels who was best known for such near-sf technothrillers as *Firefox* (1977, filmed 1982) and *Firefox Down* (1983), died on 4 April; he was 69.

Edward Wellen (1919–2011), prolific US mystery author who published many sf stories and the sf/crime novel *Hijack* (1971), died on 15 January aged 91.

READERS' POLL

MARTIN McGRATH

The headline this year is that we had a tie both for top story and top artwork. Nina Allan's 'Flying in the Face of God' (#227) and Jason Sanford's 'Plague Birds' (#228) tied at the top of the short story poll, while Richard Wagner tied with himself for his artwork for Jim Hawkins' 'Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark Matter' (#229) and Aliette de Bodard's 'The Shipmaker' (#231).

The number of voters fell off sharply this year (it's the second lowest turnout since I started doing this poll in 2005) although the actual number of votes cast fell more slowly. The most notable change was the decline in the number of negative votes (down from a high of 81 in 2007 to just 15 this year). The story that collected the most negative votes was 'Alternate Girl's Expatriate Life' by Rochita Loenen-Ruiz (#229) – it still received over twice as many positive votes than negative votes, but it obviously split opinions.

For the fourth year in a row every story received at least one positive vote. The number of stories that received not one negative vote jumped to a record level and is consistent with the overall sharp decline in negative voting.

Issue #226 was the most popular issue, followed by #227. Usually the early issues in the year poll weakly – possibly because people forget the early stories – so this is a notable change in the pattern of past polls.

The number of votes in the artwork category fell back sharply after a dramatic increase last year. The big change this year was the dominance of internal artwork compared to the covers, which normally run away with the poll. A number of readers voted for "all the covers" – which makes sense as they were individual parts of one artwork – but a number also voted negatively for "all the covers" (the only negative votes in the artwork poll this year were for covers).

Richard Wagner was the artist whose work received the most positive votes this year.

Chris Geeson

Great to see the return of both Chris Beckett and Antony Mann – two of my favourites (who I discovered through *Interzone*) – and I'm pleased to say their new stories lived up to the high standards I've come to expect from both authors and from the magazine.

Scott Beeler

Apparently you decided to save the best for last in 2010, as the Jason Sanford special (#231) was a fantastic issue. I had enjoyed greatly Sanford's stories from *Interzones* past, but all three of his stories in the special exceeded my expectations. To top it off, Matthew Cook's and Aliette de Bodard's contributions in that issue were excellent as well. I hope you continue to publish more of Sanford's stories; he's shown himself to be a very skilled and inventive writer and I'm looking forward to seeing more from him.

Doug Clark

I did not like the idea of one piece of artwork on the cover of multiple issues.

Rainer Graf-Hickel

First of all I must say that I have read and really enjoyed *Interzone* for the third year running now. I've not the slightest and faintest idea of terminating my subscription and I hope I can read *Interzone* for many more years. I wish you all the best in your efforts of publishing *Interzone* for many, many more years. I hope at least until 2053, when I will turn 90 and would be proud to be an *Interzone* reader still at that point of time.

To my mind, your magazine is getting better every year. There are not many things to improve. (Apart from the 'cover art problem' – see below.)

"Every year is getting better" – this could be your motto, a better phrase than "every year is getting shorter" as in the famous Pink Floyd lyrics. (Although the latter is, unfortunately, also true. There's a strange phenomenon of time acceleration caused by you which reverberates even in our small, low-populated German country here, with all these *Interzone* readers in their fast, high-energetic waiting mode, impatiently waiting for the next issue, accelerating time in order to shorten the period until the next issue.)

Apart from the stories, which reach ever higher levels of quality, I especially liked and much appreciated the interviews with Gary Wolfe, Connie Willis and Jason Sanford, the latter being one of my favourite SF writers at the moment (although his stories the years before were even better). And Bookzone is more stuff with a high potential of addiction. Just carry on with your magazine. I'll hope for more excellent stories, reviews and articles (until 2053 at least!).

The one thing I didn't like was the cover art on this year's issues. That's, however, purely subjective. I think it's a slight injustice against the other artists to have only one artist for all covers. I like it better if there is one artist for each cover. (That is of course not the fault of

— WINNING STORIES —



1= Flying in the Face of God
NINA ALLAN
issue #227
illustrated by Robert Dunn



1= Plague Birds
JASON SANFORD
issue #228
illustrated by Darren Winter

Warwick Fraser-Coombe, whose other cover arts in previous issues I liked very much.)

Maybe it would be a good idea to have covers created by two or even three artists together? But maybe you had this already in your many years of publishing *Interzone*. Just a thought, maybe not a good idea. But there are also stories written by two authors, so it could work also with cover art?

(On the other hand, the cover art is only secondary for me. The stories are more important for me.)

Stephen Tollyfield

Clearly it was Jason Sanford's year – again. Just how different his stories can be was clear from the very first story of the year, 'Into the Depths of Illuminated Seas'. From the special issue 'Peacemaker, Peacemaker, Little Bo Peep' was probably the most memorable – but all benefit from the intensity of feeling he brings to each story. However, none were as entertaining as 'Plague Birds' and hopefully that means we will be seeing a continuing character.

Another writer I noticed this year because of the mood she invests every story with is Nina Allan. I had been particularly taken with her stories in *Black Static*, but she is equally good writing science fiction in 'Flying in the Face of God'. 'The Upstairs Window' however is more of the kind of 'slipstream' story that used to appear in *The Third Alternative*.

Having said that, issue #230 was a particularly enjoyable one. I particularly appreciated Alette de Bodard's 'Age of Miracles, Age of Wonders'. The artwork for this story by Darren Winter was striking and effective. Both stories by Alette de Bodard were absorbing.

I particularly appreciate the efforts you appear to go to, to attract writers from all over the world. Worth mentioning are Lavie Tidhar with 'The Insurance Agent' and Rochita Loenen-Ruiz with 'Alternate Girl's Expatriate Life'.

No stand-out duds this year – I look forward to another year of the unexpected.

Also appreciated the retrospective on Nick Lowe – 25 years!!

Peter Hollo

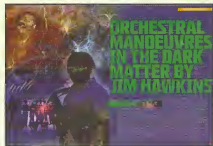
All in all, there were at least two issues that were really superlative this year, and all except one issue had at least one story I thought was excellent – I think it's been one of the strongest in quite a while.

Also a big cheer for the always wonderful Nick Lowe. It was great to see the tribute to his Mutant Popcorn, which needs to be collected in book form methinks.

Rob Butler

I thought issue #226 was very strong this year. I've picked out some stories I particularly liked and a few I didn't really take to. I've noticed doing this that I've selected three by Jason Sanford so your special Jason Sanford issue was clearly a good idea!

— WINNING ILLUSTRATIONS —



1=
Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark Matter
RICHARD WAGNER
issue #229
story by Jim Hawkins



1=
The Shipmaker
RICHARD WAGNER
issue #231
story by Alette de Bodard

TOP TEN STORIES

- 1= Flying in the Face of God
Nina Allan (#227)
- 1= Plague Birds
Jason Sanford (#228)
- 3 Into the Depths of Illuminated Seas
Jason Sanford (#226)
- 4 The Shipmaker
Alette de Bodard (#231)
- 5 The Shoe Factory
Matthew Cook (#231)
- 6 Dance of the Kawkawroons
Mercurio D. Rivera (#227)
- 7 In the Harsh Glow of its Incandescent Beauty
Mercurio D. Rivera (#226)
- 8 Hibakusha
Tyler Keevil (#226)
- 9 Human Error
Jay Lake (#226)
- 10 Age of Miracles, Age of Wonders
Alette de Bodard (#230)

TOP TEN ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1= Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark Matter
Richard Wagner (#229)
- 1= The Shipmaker
Richard Wagner (#231)
- 3 Age of Miracles, Age of Wonders
Darren Winter (#230)
- 4 Over Water
Richard Wagner (#228)
- 5 Peacemaker, Peacemaker, Little Bo Peep
Warwick Fraser-Coombe (#231)
- 6 Plague Birds
Darren Winter (#228)
- 7 The Melancholy
Paul Drummond (#229)
- 8 The Shoe Factory
Ben Baldwin (#231)
- 9 All the covers: Playground (Hide & Seek)
Warwick Fraser-Coombe (#226–231)
- 10 Camelot
Ben Baldwin (#226)

Thanks once again to Martin for conducting the poll and supplying us with lots of invaluable statistics. Thanks also to all the readers who sent in votes and comments. Please don't forget that you can make your views known throughout the year by making use of your Interaction forum on the website: t2apress.com/forum



JON INGOLD sloppers

Jon Ingold is a writer and games designer from Cambridge, UK.
His short fiction has appeared before in *Interzone*, and he also
writes interactive fiction for the Kindle and the web. And blues at
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"Sleepers." He paused to let the word sink in.
 "From Centauri."

"I don't know, Jean-Luc," I smiled the same steady smile I'd been wearing since I first took the chair across from his. My hands were folded around my beads: I usually found them to be a great comfort in the face of such decrepitude, but with Jean-Luc I pushed them around more for patience. "No-one's been to Centauri for a hundred years."

"One hundred and seven. The last colonists escaped Independence Day '81. I bet you didn't know that? Independence Day. One of their jokes at our expense."

This could have been any of the times we sat talking together in his little room in the Château. Jean-Luc was old, and old men always tell the same stories, as though their lives have crystallised down around a few grains of thought. Pearls of wisdom, they call them.

"By the time they were let out of the dog-pen after coming down..." He curled his lip, where a younger man would have shaken his head. "They lasted another three years. Enough to see the Senate take the lightgate to bits. That was the real end of it. That was what put my Grandma away."

"I heard they were rebuilding the gate."

"The Indians are saying that, are they?"

"The new Premier."

He harrumphed, like a horse blowing out air. "They say that every time. I've seen out thirty Premiers – I saw Djan-go, and Maynard, and Huoc-Nguyen. No-one remembers him. And they always poll a vote on the lightgate and they always vote no."

"This time is different. We've got the technology for it now."

He chuckled, and swirled his glass. The ice-cubes inside rattled like dice.

"Won't matter. Never matters. Right now some Korean's building the next big thing a spaceman can't be without. And no greenhorn Premier wants to go down in history as the Premier who opened the lightgate when the newest thing wasn't ready. That's what they'll say. You'll see."

He threw back his drink. For as long as I knew him, which was less than a year, he always drank deep, because he was a man who did nothing with less than all his heart. Perhaps it dulled the pain.

"I understand. You're saying the risk is always too great, even if there isn't any risk at all." I pushed another bead around. "That argument makes me think of Pascal's Wager: that any intelligent man must believe in God, because the cost of false belief is lower than the cost of false disbelief."

"This Pascal was no gay-boy, then. No African. No woman. Sounds like he was barely alive." He drew one finger over his head to indicate my condition. "Same as you."

"I'm alive," I replied, still smiling. "And a Christian, same as Pascal."

"I don't know what you are. What are you? You're some kind of freak. Are there more like you?"

"A few hundred. You know that."

"Should have cleaned you all out at birth," he said uncharitably, and refilled his glass from the bottle by his elbow.

I lower my head slightly, which makes the damaged skin on the back of my neck crease and stretch. Sometimes it splits. I spend much of my life sitting still.

"I'm sure you know, Jean-Luc, when the reactors gave out, no-one knew –"

He cut me off with an unhappy shrug. "Can't you take a joke?"

The Château is an old manor house, where they send people suffering from that one disease which is still incurable and unfalteringly terminal. The residents are fed and cleaned by machines, and can often go for a month or more without seeing another human being anywhere except the stream. The Abbot calls old age a prison for the innocent, and while I'm not sure Jean-Luc was wholly innocent, he – and the others in the other rooms – did not deserve such lonely confinement. I tried to visit each at least once a fortnight, and had been doing so ever since I was made a full initiate and allowed outside Abbey grounds. It was my place in life, the only good I could do.

But I visited Jean-Luc more than the rest. He had some quality, some force of personality, that meant I came away from our meetings richer than I went in, no matter how little we had in common.

The Holy Book has a quote for everything, and everybody. Here is Jean-Luc as I remember him:

'His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire... In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.' (Revelations 1:12-16)

"Did I tell you why I never had any children?"

I laughed. "I can imagine a reason."

He puffed his cheeks with annoyance. "Monks shouldn't make jokes like that. What kind of monk are you?"

We were friends. He enjoyed it when I spoke with careless irreverence: I think being insulted by a freak appealed to his sense of the macabre. "For you to have had children," I said sagely, "means to have convinced someone, at least for an hour or so," – he smirked – "that under your miserable exterior is a pure soul. I can see it, of course. But then I'm trained."

"A pure soul." He half-giggled, half-spat. "You're a crackpot."

I shook my head carefully. "You shouldn't drink, Jean-Luc. It makes you quick to anger."

"I'm a hundred and eleven," he growled. "I'm the oldest man in France. This stuff keeps me alive. It's my deuterium." He grinned lustily. "And the robots that spy on me here can't smell."

I kept my face completely level. "Are the robots from Centauri?"

"Don't be a fool," he snapped. "They make them in Taiwan. They didn't have any robots on Centauri. They did everything by hand."

His obsession with the lost colony on Centauri came from his Grandma, whom he claimed to remember as a

passionate, powerful woman even though he could not have been more than three years old when she died of multiple cancers over a century ago. As a child he had been given her logs and photos to play with, along with the name-badge from her pod-suit and a shard taken from a Centauri cliff-face to make way, he said, for the first strut of the first bio-dome. And since he had no children himself, there had been no-one for him to pass these trinkets onto. They'd stayed with him, growing in importance, I think, as his world shrank to the size of a single room.

"You know, Jean-Luc, I must have visited you ten times and you've never told me where you were born, or anything about your job or your life."

"I'm not infertile," he answered huffily. "If that's what you mean."

I smiled again. "And how can you be sure? If you never had any children?"

I had never been rude to anyone until I met Jean-Luc. He fell about laughing, and we laughed together, at the foolish sin of pride that, despite his age, still held such an iron grip on him. I knew from the nurses that as a younger man he had been a repairman for factory robots: not skilled work, but physically demanding, and you could still see it in the shape of his skin, in the ropes of muscle that hung around his neck and arms. I have often reflected that he must have been powerful once, an unreasonable brute. I could scarcely believe he had not left children in a score of broken homes. That he was now as charitable and forgiving as he was seemed to me a miracle; further proof of the inner light that shines within all of us.

"I'm not," he insisted, still thinking about his fecundity. "Not like you."

I passed a palm over the scabbed and scaled surface of my head. I had long since taken to lowering my hood when alone with Jean-Luc. "I am what I am," I said. "*As a man thinks, so is he.* Proverbs."

"No better than a trained chimp," he scolded, which made a change from him calling me a lizard. "When I was a boy the Church had force. It had *lungs*. Where it went, people followed."

"Then our way is better. Now we follow where people go."

"Damn you and all your kind," he answered flatly, and picked up his glass to rattle the ice. He always rattled the ice to disguise the way his hands shook.

I moistened my tongue with a little soya and checked the time. I always spent longer with Jean-Luc than was fair, but then the other residents talked of nothing but their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as if they had long ago parcelled up their souls into little pieces and handed them out for safekeeping. And those thoughtful enough to ask after my own family in return were always made afraid by the answer, as if my own history might somehow leak out and erase theirs.

"Should I go now, Jean-Luc?"

There was a long pause and he didn't answer, so I rose quietly from my chair, raised my cowl, and left him to his sleep.

The colony on the fifth world of Centauri was humanity's first attempt at reaching out into the depths of space beyond the lightgate. That it was even tried seems now like the most supreme arrogance: in a rocket held together by rivets and solder and powered by fire and magnetics alone, fifteen thousand souls were packed into zip-pods that offered no more protection against the inertial forces between dimensions than if they'd wrapped themselves in bubble-wrap. They took with them a few vats of chemicals, a bank of frozen spores, and as much of the sum of human writing as they could fit onto their library drives. Whatever they needed to know once out there they had to carry with them: there was no way to communicate with Earth once on the other side. Probes had been engineered to go through and then return, and they had brought back with them hints of a chain of worlds, but how suitable any was for colonisation was unknown. The logic ran that whoever had built the gate to Earth must have come themselves from an Earth-like world, but if it had turned out that the gate was a link to Venus then the colony ship would have to have turned about and come straight home. If the ship could even survive two trips through the gate. Nothing was certain.

The colonists went anyway, for fifteen thousand different reasons. There's a tape in the Lunar Timebox where every one has recorded a statement, but it makes for dull viewing – haunting, perhaps, but unrevealing. They speak with a strange, child-like confidence and say nothing of cost or consequence or risk. Watching, one starts to wonder if they knew themselves why they were going. "I want them to name a street after me," says one. "This'll show Dad," says another. "What with the net and the wire," says a third, "I feel like there's nothing left on Earth I haven't seen, so..." Jean-Luc's Grandma, he told me, had said she wanted to know if everywhere in the universe was the same or if somewhere could be truly different. "I could never be satisfied with my life on this ball of rock if I'd turned down the chance to see another," she explains to the tape.

This attitude seems alien to me; like choosing to become a Zoroastrian simply because that faith is undersubscribed, or like choosing to be born as I was instead of properly formed and whole. But it is a mode of thought I've often seen among the scientists I have met, as though their constant exposure to generalisation leads them inevitably to a point of desperate nihilism. After all, when everything must obey Four Laws, how can the universe ever surprise and delight us? It seems to me that scientists live in the constant hope and dread of something that will shatter their theories and undermine their models, and in so doing, gift them with something wholly, blessedly new. They search and search for contradictions. And yet, so many are so energetic in their resistance of the infinite and wondrous mysteries and contradictions of God that might make them whole.

No matter. God, I am sure, watches all this with patience and compassion. Like a scientist himself, he has seen it all before.

"Eyes," Jean-Luc says. I forget when. "They danced to attract our eyes. Looking for a way in."

I watch his own eyes as he speaks. They are powerful but sad, brilliant but raging. He cannot forgive himself for being so old, so repetitious, so unable to adapt and move on. So changeless. No doubt he sees my pity but it does him no good.

"Sleepers," he says. "Do you see?"

From the point of view of Earth the mission was a curious anti-climax. All over the world, people clustered around their streams to watch the launch, and held their collective breath as smoke then fire then supercharged ion streams burst from the base of the tiny ship. They willed the vessel into the skies and when two days later it reached the gate, those on the night-side of the planet watched through binoculars as light bloomed and the dark centre irised open. And then, nothing. The plan was for the colonists to return if they had to and otherwise to send word once settled: first after six months, and again after two years. The difficulty of sending a device back through the gate made more frequent contact prohibitive. (Again, under such circumstances, it seems incredible that they went at all.)

So six months went by before the first message-in-a-bottle was received. The lightgate opened for a moment to allow through a tumbling satellite. It was captured by a mining crew off Ceres and leaked onto the stream well before it reached Government hands. There were pictures of a giant's-scale world of aquifers and blue-glass columns and webs and spans of fine crystalline thread. One image lodged in the public eye and came to symbolise the hopes for New Earth: the top of a pine tree silhouetted against a darkening yellow sky dotted faintly with unfamiliar and as-yet-unnamed constellations.

There were personal messages for the families of the colonists. Jean-Luc's grandmother described the cramped conditions, the group's uncertain mood – sometimes elated, often morose – and the frustrations of getting food crops started when the local soil contained so little nitrogen but so much fluorine and arsenic.

There was no mention of the lights, or of the Centaureans themselves. There were twenty-eight pregnancies, twelve of which had begun out in space. No-one had yet died.

I made sure to see Jean-Luc the day after the Senate voted to rebuild the gate. "The time for one-world politics is over," the Premier announced on the stream, his youthful face airbrushed frame-by-frame into a beguiling smile, inspiring trust. "We are better-informed. Our technology is unrecognisably superior to what we possessed over a century ago. We are now in a position to turn those brave footsteps into a blazing trail. Just as our ancestors once crossed great oceans and leapt from Earth to the Moon, so we will now reach out into the furthest depths of space and take the next great stride towards humanity's universal destiny."

Reactions flooded in. Some pointed to the faltering economy, energy rationing and the on-going belligerence in Seasia as factors in the Premier's thinking. But most

commenters seemed enthusiastic. The mistakes of the past were brushed over. *Faulty life-supports – did you know they ran them off fission? They were caught in a sandstorm. They over-bred the crops and things mutated.* The Centaureans were reduced to mere gremlins in the circuitry, and no-one pointed out that these gremlins were now two hundred years more advanced as well.

"Idiots," Jean-Luc declared bitterly, tapping the folder in which he kept his Grandma's papers. "Do these young people think the world was made for them alone?"

I was not in the mood for his cynicism. To me, the announcement had been a message of hope. "Sometimes we have to make history," I said. New technology meant the stream would be able to carry live footage of planetfall, and I could hardly wait out the year for those first glimpses of an alien world. (And, of course, it was Jean-Luc himself who had inspired such an interest in me.)

"Sometimes we have to make mistakes, you mean."

"Do you really believe in the Centaureans, Jean-Luc? No-one else seems to."

"There's nothing to believe or not believe. My Grandma saw them."

"What did she see?"

"They lived in the crystals. They're made of light. She saw them watching her. Following her around."

"Following her, like shadows?"

"No," he said. (Monks should never attempt irony; it is usually misunderstood.) "And then there were her missing hours."

He paused to let his hook spin on its line. I reached over and poured him a Bourbon. "Missing hours?"

"It's all here." He tapped his folder. "A lot of the colonists reported things, but my Grandma proved it. She was doing some experiments in the lab. She lost three hours between one observation and the next."

"She must have fallen asleep. All those chemicals."

"She went on to make a study," he continued, doggedly.

"The only study of the Centaureans ever made. When they landed the Government made her hand over all copies, that's how important it was. And she did hand them over, all except the one she couldn't give. The one in her head." He tapped his temple. "Three years later when they took apart the gate and she was so ill, she wrote everything down and left it to me. I'm the world's greatest expert now, the only one outside the Senate House who knows..."

"I see."

"I know what you're thinking. Don't think it. My Grandma had no imagination. She never made anything up. She was a woman made of facts, pure, hard, facts. Same as I am. You'd never hear me telling stories. Not her and not me."

I smiled, and pushed a bead around my rosary. "Why don't you tell me all about them, then? Then there can be two experts."

"Amphibious," he replied, shivering with enthusiasm. "That was her genius. They live in the crystals but also in gases. That's how they move about. And they live for centuries, maybe forever. They're active in twilight. During the day, they're still and feed on sunlight. Let me tell you

how they breed..."

And so for half an hour, he came wholly to life, and his gleaming eyes were lightgates themselves, tunnelling out of the dull room to the surface of another world. I listened and his words drew pictures in my mind. It was like lying in the Abbey grounds as a child and watching the clouds form into creatures I had never seen and had no names for.

How much time passed I had no notion. I heard him coughing, and then he finished, "And that's how they killed them off, one by one." He must have seen me react as I came back to myself, and he misread it as distrust. "Don't doubt it. One by one, until only twenty came home."

I shook my head to clear the cobwebs. To cover my inattention, I said: "I can't believe in these demons of yours, Jean-Luc. God makes no such creatures. And the only place the Devil put evil was inside our own hearts."

He shot me a mocking smile and jerked a thumb at the stream on the wall. It was still playing the Premier's speech on a rolling loop. "You'll see. I promise you. We'll watch the landing together and you'll have to say Jean-Luc, you were right, for all my goddamn learning and praying and virtue I should have listened..."

"I'd like to watch it with you."

"You think I won't make it that long? You watch me. I'm too old to die now... Why are you smiling, you culture?"

"Jean-Luc, I'm afraid you might be right."

"When they open that gate," he said. "You'll see. They've been waiting for us to do it, you know. I told you, didn't I? They have sleepers. What else would they be waiting for, except the gate?"

On the day the repair shuttle launched, I arranged with the Château authorities to take Jean-Luc out to see it. They made me sign a form for him like he was a library book, taking legal responsibility for his health and waiving any rights I might prove to have in his will for the duration of the trip. They also wanted my credit so they could fine me a month's fees in lost income if he died: I have no account, of course, so I gave them the credit of the monastery and crossed myself for luck. Then they helped me lift him, light as an eggshell, into a chair which we wheeled to the service elevator. It was only big enough for one so he rode alone down to the goods entrance, and I found him, parked by the Château's loading drone between boxes of frozen food and rolls of plastic sheets. He was grinning like a loon. He wore dark glasses and a hat against the sun.

We travelled by taxi to the station and then by floating train over the snow-capped Pyrenees. The views left me awe-struck. I had never been outside Lyons before, but of course I was originally conceived from stocks housed near the Lisbon off-shore reactor core, and as every shimmering peak floated away beneath us I felt strangely like I was returning home.

Jean-Luc, on the other hand, was more interested in our fellow passengers: coffee-brown guys in shirts and white trousers, and women of all ages with pill-pallid skin and headcarves. They wore no makeup. "Not the way I remember Spanish ladies," he snickered dirtily, talking in as

loud a voice as he liked. "This whole world is going to the dogs, Raphael. The whole nine yards of it."

We'd brought his Bourbon along in an old mouthwash bottle. I told him to be quiet and take a swig, and prayed that his liver would last the day. He must have understood the look on my rough face as he grumbled, "Don't you worry about me, brother. I told you. It keeps me alive."

"Jean-Luc, the liquor..."

"Lizard idiot. Why don't you ever understand what I'm saying? What kind of advert for religion are you when you're so dumb?"

"I'm a child of the hurricanes," I said. "I'm the best advert for religion, or the worst, there could possibly be."

"I'll show you something, then. Put your God back in his hole. I've waited this long but I'll show you." He harumphed, then took a deep draw of mouthwash and exhaled a rough alcoholic breath as though he was the dragon of the two of us. I waited for something to happen, but nothing did.

He looked around the carriage to see if anyone had dared to disapprove. One lady was frowning so he bared his remaining teeth and hissed, "I'm a hundred and eleven, you know."

The train glided silently on. In his eyes, behind the glasses, the light of his soul was dancing vibrantly, alive with childish glee, and I couldn't help but be happy to see it. Even if he was a menace.

For the launch, one can do no better than this:

'And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into the ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore' (Matthew 13:2)

(Though I also like "These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep" from the Book of Psalms.)

We were on the sierra in good time, six hours before take-off (what we call *T-minus-three-sixty-m*). The crowd already stretched out from the barrier fences for a good few miles in every direction, and there were boats gathering off the coast as well. I'd written to the spaceport authority the week before to ask if Jean-Luc, as a descendant of an original colonist, could have a place reserved in one of the viewing galleries, and had received a form rejection thanking me for my interest. Scribbled below was a note pointing out that there were nearly eighty thousand direct descendants on file, and so they'd been forced to limit VIP places to business leaders and statesmen. I told Jean-Luc but his reply was only, "See? They have a file on us."

We rolled our way slowly over the scrub, picking a winding path between circles of people talking and eating and singing and dancing together. The mood was familiar and welcoming, as if we had all known each other once, a long time before. I could have spent a happy few hours wandering between the different groups, leading prayers for the success of the mission, but instead I listened to Jean-Luc repeat his old stories in his brassy monotone. Occasionally, people would turn their heads to listen, but never for long. "It was radiation that killed the last colony," one man

shouted at us. "They didn't have no anti-beta shields! My cousin works where they make them, now, says business is looking up!"

"Radiation?" Jean-Luc replied contemptuously. "Did you ever hear of radiation that could get into your body and take hold of you? Did you ever hear of radiation with soldiers, fighting a war? Did you ever hear of radiation using spies?"

"I still don't understand about the spies, Jean-Luc," I said quietly, as I wheeled him on, hoping to calm him down a little so that he wouldn't have a heart-attack. "Even if they somehow brainwashed the surviving colonists, everybody from that mission is dead; long, long dead. There's nothing of them left."

All he answered was, "How many direct descendants did you say they had on file?"

The launch, when it finally happened, was as breathtaking a thing as I have ever witnessed. It began as a spark and then bloomed like a flower into a fireball the size of a mountain, that even from our great distance made us sweat with its heat. The metal dart at its peak, a tiny, shining dot, seemed to move impossibly slowly as it clambered into the air.

The sound reached us much later than the sight, then later still there was the smoke, that stung our eyes and left a taste of oil in our throats, and by the time it had cleared the craft with its five human beings inside was gone.

As one, we craned our necks to trace the vapour trail away to where it seemed to disappear behind the moon – all except Jean-Luc, that is, who could no longer lift his head without assistance. He looked out to sea, and smiled his cruel and selfish smile, and drank in rhythmic motions from his mouthwash bottle.

And then it was over and there was nothing left to see, except tired and fractious people, all a long way from home. Jean-Luc was as eager to leave as the rest, but I made us wait, partly to avoid the queues and partly to pray for the men and women in the ship. I knew Jean-Luc expected none of them to survive: he was watching for the rocket to tumble out of the sky and into the ocean. I called on God to challenge his certainty, to prove that Creation was a place for hope and goodwill.

I did not believe in demons. Not even the ones from Centauri that Jean-Luc claimed to be possessed by.

He died without incident, a few weeks later.

I was allowed to see the body and deliver the last rites that I assured the wardens he had requested, and there he was, slumped down in his chair with his Bourbon bottle and a biscuit in his lap. All the fight had gone out of him. He looked shrunken and brittle, smaller than I had ever known him to be, as though only his breath had been keeping his bones from collapsing in on one another.

"He was a hundred and eleven," I told the mortician and the doctor as they lifted him onto a stretcher, as gently as if he was a kite made of tissue-paper and matchsticks, as if the slightest gust of wind might have taken him away. "He might have been the oldest man in the country. He

believed it was because of the Centaureans. He thought he had one inside him, keeping him alive."

The mortician smiled and shook her head. "His records say eighty-four. He looks plenty older but that's collagen damage. I'd guess he worked with robots; they used to leak anti-betas all the time. Poor guy. He was probably sterile and riddled with cancer. Might even have glowed in the dark. Safety was that bad, thirty, forty years ago."

Not lowering my hood, I nodded. The scales on my neck rustled. "I know." I looked over at Jean-Luc, expecting a cackling belittlement, but he was silent, ashamed. I left him to his sleep, taking his Grandma's folder of notes and photos with me.

Somewhere above, or below, or somewhere, the light-gate had been realigned, and its huge solar batteries were refilling after more than a century of drain. It had not yet been switched on. There was a rolling ad on the stream looking for applicants for the *Mayflower II*. I was young, unattached. Healthy enough, in my way. I could look after the spiritual needs of a diverse group. I spoke English and Nuovo Latina and enough Cantonese to christen, marry and commend souls to Heaven.

I was confident I would at least get an interview, and there I could show my true value: that I knew as much as anybody about the planet beyond the gate, its climate and strange topography, its fauna, cycles, dangers and wonders. I knew about the previous colony, its failures, what it had achieved and left behind. From so long talking with Jean-Luc I could picture those places as if I had seen them myself. I walked crystal fields in my dreams. This was the chance I had been waiting for, to leave behind the Abbey that had sheltered and contained me for so long. It would be like going home.

Or so it seemed to me. Damn those eyes; those passionate, fiery eyes. Without the use of a single rotting muscle the old man had still buried the idea of Centauri so deeply in my head I could no longer remember who or what I'd been before I met him.

The Abbey seemed nothing but a curious dream, the kind that is utterly captivating, but long gone by sunrise. I wonder what Earth will look like when we see it from the gate.

Here is something suitably apocalyptic, to please the old man's ghost:

'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.' (Acts 2:17)

And those are my reasons, good or bad; for it seems to me now that we do not choose the things we believe in, even if we spend our whole lives playing out their consequences. Ideas choose us. They spread and breed, surviving age and change. They live strange lives all of their own.

The gate is ready. Ready to be opened, except we do not say opened. We say, *woken up*. ♦

IN THE SEASON OF THE MANGO RAINS

It was in the season of the mango rains...

The sun set every evening like a drunk's swollen red eye, misted over by clouds.

At that time we were living in Vientiane, in the land of the Lao. You worked in an air-conditioned office opposite the Patuxai. I stayed at home, shopping at the talat noi, the small row of stalls beside our road, buying bok choi and man falang, galangal and shallots, and the small sweet purple eggplants available year round.

We drank – moderately. We gathered our love to us like a fragile, precious thing that was about to run out. It was the season of green mango...sour and new, and quick to end.

It was a time shortly after St Cohen gave birth to the Others. They came out of the Breeding Grounds in that closed-loop network in Jerusalem and soon, it seemed, they were everywhere, or nowhere – it was hard to tell. Digital entities, they had little use for or understanding of humanity. They simply became a pattern of things, like mango season or the rainy season or the dry season. They were just there.

It was before the Exodus, before the vast slow ships began to leave, slingshot out of the solar system towards...who knew? A better life, somewhere else, far away. Chasing a dream in the deepness of space. You used to say: "But nothing dreams, out there. Only on Earth there are dreams."

We sought to understand dreams. Wired together, we showed each other around. I dreamed in Technicolor, thrillers and chases, explosions and assassins. I dreamed of time travel and sex. Your dreams were different. So were your nightmares.

At the end, even sharing our dreams wasn't enough.

I used to say, "A kiss never changes. A kiss is always a kiss."

We used to talk of the fundamental constants, that small set of numbers that make the universe the way it is. The speed of light, Planck's Constant, Pi... I used to tell you a kiss was a fundamental constant, trying to convince you, but it wasn't true. Only people kiss, and people are a quick bright flash across the universe. Kisses, like mangoes, do not last long, and nor do people. Remember how you used to say that?

Perhaps that is why...

It was before, even, the monks of Udom Xai, those strange transcendence-chasers up in the mountains, who'd built a thing which might have been God, or a gateway to God, or simply a sculpture of existential art – no one could tell once they were gone. It was before tentacle-junkies, and before Tong Yun City on Mars was more than a ramshackle settlement. It was the early days. People still remembered *Casablanca* and Pacman in those days.

We'd make love desperately, holding on to each other like bodies washed in the current of the Mekong, helpless to stop it. The water of the Mekong fell from the Himalayas down, down... glacial waters warming on their journey through China, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam...the current could snatch you away, a magician with a disappearing handkerchief or coin. We feared the current. We held on, but it never did any good. Perhaps that is why...

I don't blame you. It was before the appearance of Ogko, that messiah of platitudes who preached no religion – Ogko, who may have been an alien and may have been a fiction, born – who knew where? Ogko who said, "Life is like a river –" handing out a used simile with the joy of someone who knew it didn't matter.

Words, like humans, pass too quickly, and leave little behind. Suns explode. Humans come apart, atom by atom. Nothing is ever wasted. We are all information.

As if that's any consolation.

But maybe if you had Ogko...or Jesus, or Elron, the Buddha, Madonna, St Cohen...if you had religion you might not have left. But you could not abide religion. I found comfort in those small gatherings, a Vientiane Hanukah where half-Tibetan half-Jewish children played with spinning-tops, half-Thai half-Jewish, half-Lao half-Jewish, lots of halves getting together to make a whole with candles and fried foods. Everybody likes to eat. I found comfort in food, too. But you...

We met, we loved, we said goodbye – only you never said

BY LAVIE TIDHAR

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goodbye. You just went. Not into God, not even the Udom Xai monks' idea of it, but into what the Christians call Limbo. The place of waiting. We used to joke it was Vientiane that was the place of waiting. The place where nothing ever happened. A place where it always rained and the sun always shone.

It wasn't true, of course. But we liked to say it, finding comfort in a shared falsehood, a shared – however skewered – perception of a world.

But it was not enough. None of it was – not when you watched every year slip away, the days counted down like coins. Not when you watched the gathering grey hairs, watched for the loosening of skin, began to feel the weight that drags you down with the passing of the years. We were not enough. You could not find comfort in religion – you had no time for lies. And food, and sex, the scent of flowers – or even better, that entire global industry of entertainment – movies and TV and books and music, dance and theatre and games – was not enough. They were a lie, toys to prevent a mind from thinking of what lay beyond – the cold, the empty, endless space, where atoms fly away from one another, forever, as Larkin, poor dead Larkin once said.

You found no comfort in his poetry, for it offered none. And as for Plath...

And so you slipped away from me. One night we went to sleep – it was the season of the mango rains. The night was cool, a brief respite. We slept naked, but with a blanket over us. It rained – a little, gently. It was very quiet. The single street light shone softly.

I usually have trouble falling asleep but that night was different. I slept easily, for the first time in months. I remember your arm around me. I woke up early, for a pee, but your side of the bed was empty.

I wasn't sure I understood. My morning erection was pleasantly painful – had you gone to work already? Were you watching news with the sound turned off?

Your note was in the kitchen. You had made my coffee before you left, for the last time. The percolator was switched on, the coffee brewed – two heaped spoons, the right amount of water, the way you always left it for me, a remnant of you for when I

woke up.

"They offer it in Bangkok now," you told me, months before. We were eating on the river. Mosquitoes circled around us. Above our head the giant spiders crawled across the moon, great mechanical engines reshaping the heavens.

"I'm sorry, what?" I wasn't listening. My eyes strayed after two backpackers: short shorts and long legs...

You only laughed. "It doesn't matter," you said.

It did.

Life is like a river, Ogko said. We are like boats, sailing a short stretch before we capsize. And yet...

They had it in Bangkok by then, right alongside the doll-houses and the cosmetic surgeries of Soi Cowboy. A silly old thing, really – they say Walt Disney had it done back when the world was young.

"There is a way," you said, "to hold back time. To wait – not alive, not dead, but something in between, forever."

"To wait for what?" I said, confused.

"To wait for something better..."

You're still there. I visit you, sometimes. You do not see me. You wouldn't want to. The world has changed – you wouldn't recognise Tong Yun City these days, and as for Vientiane...

But you would never know. Frozen, perfect, you've beaten the river. Perhaps you'll wake, one day, where the river runs dry. Waking, you'll open eyes on a dying red sun, look around you at a dying Earth. I won't be there. Who, or what, will be I do not know, nor care. But maybe not. They told me they had plans to ship the stiffs (it's what they call you) in giant hollowed out rocks: around the sun and into space, forever.

Perhaps you'll never have to wake. The universe will live and die and breathe its last breath softly. You'd never have to know. Sometimes I come to visit you, and try to say goodbye. I never can. I still have your note...but my hair is soft and grey. My hands are wrinkled, my teeth are false, my back aches every morning. Everything aches.

I'm still alive. I still find comfort in food and festivals. There are still mangoes...when it rains softly, I still think of you. ♦

SUZANNE PALMER

THE CEILING IS

It was eight days this time, eight days pacing my cubbyhome listening to my neighbor bang around in his, like rats in bottles, waiting for the next job. When it came it was like someone had jabbed me with a knife; I jumped up and was out the door, readypack over my shoulder and flashing assignment pad in hand, before the job could pass on to someone else. If I was lucky, it'd be a multi-week assignment and I could afford to get some real food before returning home.

I spared a quick glance at my neighbor's door as I headed down the narrow corridors of the cubbyplex. I'd peeked once at the old man's skill-ratings and didn't think there were very many well-paying jobs that he was qualified for, even without the age penalty. *Not my problem*, I told myself. I was careful, always kept a reserve of food and set aside a portion of my pay for voluntary supplemental training. When I could, I sometimes brought him back a little extra food to help tide him over, so I shouldn't feel guilty for the times I couldn't, right? It wasn't like anyone else ever gave free help around here.

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

SIKU.



The assignment pad directed me to my plex's porter bank and, when I held it up to the bank's sensors, doors opened to let me aboard. I took my seat on the small bench. The porter's display indicated the training center up in the corporate levels of the city as my destination. No surprise there. Every company seemed to believe that their methods and philosophies were different and superior to any other's. I didn't mind, since I was credited for the time, and there was always the off-chance I'd learn something new. You had to stay on top.

I was still some distance from my destination when the porter slowed to a halt. Startled – porters were strictly one-party, non-stop – I slid to the end of the bench as the doors opened. An entirely bald, thin little man in a rough-spun green robe stepped on board. He dipped his head in what was almost more bow than nod, and I smiled back as best I could.

No other destination appeared on the board as the porter began moving again.

"Training?" I asked, curious about the job that would call for such an odd individual.

"No," the man said, his hands clasped gently behind his back as he stood there, making no move to sit. His eyes were laughing, and I felt a small flush of irritation at not knowing the joke, suspecting that in some small way I was a part of it.

I was working up the nerve to ask a more pointed question when the porter stopped again, still nowhere near the training center. The strange man stepped off and turned, standing just outside the doors and meeting my eyes as they closed between us.

The porter made no more unexpected stops.

I was met at my destination by a perky, upper-city corporate perm and ushered into the training suite. Eight other men and three women were waiting, goggles in hand. I winced as I spotted a familiar brunette. *Tala*. Worse, the only free chair left was beside her. I made my way to the back of the room, doing my best to neither meet nor avoid her eyes. Sitting down, I picked up the goggles in front of me and looked studiously at the perm.

"Okay, now that we're all here, we can begin," the perm announced. She was young, blonde, in control of the room from the moment she opened her mouth. "For this job you'll be working for Forault General Industries. It's an exciting project, one of great strategic importance to our company, and I'm pleased to tell you that if we like what we see there may be an opportunity for the very best of you to move up to a permanent position with the company."

Half the room sucked in their breaths at the same time I did; perm positions weren't often offered to contract class workers, and what was being dangled in front of us was more than a job, it was a *future* – no stuck in your cubbyhome with your body and skill-set aging watching your points tick slowly away as you wait for the next job, no wondering how long it'll be before the work dries up and your only remaining choices are the euthanasia button or fleeing into the sewers of Lowdown with the prostitutes and skunkheads where you'd die nearly as quickly, and not nearly so painlessly.

Everyone was paying a lot more attention now.

"I could talk about our project all day, but pictures speak more efficiently. If you'll put your goggles on, I'll lower the

lights and we can get the introduction underway. Please save any questions for the end."

I pulled the goggles down over my eyes and slipped in the earbuds, to the muted sounds of the others in the room doing the same. I rolled my shoulders, made myself relax. *I'm here, I have a job, I thought. Let everything else go.*

With a faint hum the goggles powered on and I hung suspended in a field of turquoise. Reaching up with invisible hands I tapped the goggles, thinking they had malfunctioned, when a wisp of something white crept into the view and I realized with a start that I was looking at the sky. Not ours; although we'd made a number of field trips from the childward to see it, our own pale sky was never free of the angry clouds that raged and fought across it. Another planet, then. I wondered which, though it hardly mattered. I couldn't even leave South 29, the city zone my cubbyplex was in, unless it was for a job.

I leaned back as my viewpoint descended and a chaotic fringe of green appeared along the bottom and quickly consumed the entire screen – plants, crowded together, wild, growing everywhere I could see. The leaves were ribbon-spirals dangling from the blue-gray branches, and as the view got closer I could see small white flowers nestled at the base of the spirals. A gentle melody, as if made by a dozen tiny bells, filled the earpiece. So, I thought, *it's philosophy first.*

The view turned, and I saw that virtual-me was standing on a platform that had been raised in the midst of the foliage, more lattice than solid structure. The spiral trees penetrated here and there along the edge where they must have grown up through the holes. A ladder disappeared down into the foliage from opposite corners. In the center, a mat was spread out in the sun, and I shifted in my real seat with some surprise as four people in green robes, all bald, came into view. They were sitting in quiet contemplation with their backs to one another on the mat.

"Welcome, at least in spirit, to Timbroro Island on the planet Fadsji. This is our sacred capital, and home to the Monks of Fadsji," a low, smooth voice said in my ear. The view turned until the speaker came into view; an older man wearing brown. "I have been given the honor of escorting you on a virtual exploration of our quiet, unassuming world."

The scenery was breathtaking, but already I was wondering what this had to do with the job. *Just go with it, I told myself.* As long as they were crediting me for my time, they could be as obtuse with their training materials as they wanted.

"As you no doubt know, Fadsji is one of the Triworlds, so-called because they are unusually near – relatively speaking! – to one another and easily moved between using jump points. The Triworlds have become increasingly popular as a tourist destination, not just among humans but among many other peoples of this vast Universe. You may have even been here on such a trip yourself. Each of the Triworld planets are distinct in character – Birtsi for its soaring cities, Oglol for its culture. And there there's Fadsji, which remains mostly wild, a place where the culture is neither easily sought out nor easily marketed. We are on a *djsi*, most easily if inexactly explained as a meditation platform."

The view shifted away from the speaker to the platform itself. In close-up, it was made of some organic, fibrous material that



didn't look all that sturdy. Luckily, my weight was fully settled in a chair back in a training room in Adarica City on Zanzjan Major, hundreds of light-years and three jumps away.

One of the four people in the center of the platform opened her eyes, then stood and indicated that we should take her place. 'We sat, and back in the training room I reached out and gripped the desk. The world seemed to stretch out around us, the forest tops falling away down to an indigo ocean that swept out to the horizon, unending, uninterrupted. The same blue sky, with its paucity of clouds, met it there as if at a physical divide. Two pale moons hung low in the sky.

Living in the contract-worker levels of the City, moving between assignments and from one cubbyhome to another, I had never seen such a panorama except in bad lobby paintings, and never credited them with giving a true picture. Only now did I realize how garishly far shy of truth they fell.

My virtual guide began speaking again. "The Elder Monks are native to this planet, but few in number. Since the first visitors to this world arrived, many of us have embraced their way; humans, certainly, but also members of thirty-seven other sentient, star-faring species. Or so it was counted when my voice was set upon this recording, anyway." There were no aliens here in Adarica City, or at least not that I had ever seen, but in the movies they were always relentless, man-eating invaders or scheming villains, the only things less trustworthy than a too-smart computer. The idea that they could be meditative was both new and intriguing. Now that I knew to look I could make out the non-human shapes among the others. I would have liked to have seen them closer.

My guide spoke again. "The wisdom of the Elder Monks is this: to comprehend the Universe – God, if you prefer, though we don't – you need only open your mind to it and let it in, and it will make its Will apparent to you." The view settled back to one place, a wide vista of green-covered land stretching down to the sea. "As you meditate, you will find that the most perfect sky before you is but a stepping-stone to the most perfect Universe beyond. For the remainder of our time, I leave you to the peace of the *dsji*, to open your mind and let the Universe in."

You're joking, right? I thought. The guide said nothing more. I watched the recorded world, a captive audience, as irritation was gradually replaced by a mesmerized calm. A waste of my time, maybe, but when in my world of cubbyhomes and porters, engineering dissections and assembly tutorials would I ever 'see' a place like this? The foliage rippled, a wind I could not feel tossing the higher whorls of leaves into a brief semblance of a dance. As it subsided, the trees nearest me moved again, against the direction of the wind, and I realized that something moved there, something spindly, almost indistinguishable from the foliage. I leaned forward in my chair, frustrated that I couldn't turn my head to shift the scene, and then the screen went black.

"You may remove your goggles now," the perm spoke, and I felt as if I'd been hauled across space itself back into that tiny room. The wall clock told me that an hour had passed, which seemed impossible. She put the palms of her hands together. "Let's jump right in. The first engineering problem in front of us is improving the structural integrity of the platforms on their anchor points. Questions?"

"Are we going to get the raw data on the composition of the surface and substrate? Also, we'll need geological stability info," a brown-haired man about my own age spoke up from a few seats down the table.

The perm smiled. "Yes, Dan. We'll be distributing handpads in a few minutes, and you'll find that they have access to that data. They'll need to remain on the premises, of course; we don't need any accidental leaks to our competitors – bad for our business, even worse for yours."

"Given the simplicity of the platform," I said, "I'd think the maximum occupancy figures would be the primary considerations, with some extra reinforcement where the ladders are attached."

Everyone stared at me. "Ladders?" the perm asked.

"For getting up and down from the platform."

She smiled again, but it was much less friendly than the one she had given Dan. "I would think it a more logical assumption that we'll use low-orbit lifters to move men and material to and from the platforms. Although if you believe you can present a compelling case for *ladders*..."

Her voice trailed off, as someone further down my side of the table snickered. The perm broke her gaze from mine. "Anyone else have *productive* questions or ideas to share?"

"What preprocessing, if any, will be done with the magnetite on site, post-extraction but prior to lift?" Tala, beside me, asked. *Magnetite? What the hell did that have to do with meditation platforms?*

"A good question, and one you yourselves will answer – engineering task number two is to determine the most efficient and cost-effective sequence from initial extraction of materials, to separation, lift, and processing. The mining platform –"

I raised my hand. The perm sighed, then indicated I could speak. "I'm sorry," I said. "We're talking about mining platforms? The training video –"

"Explained everything. You're slowing down the team, Phill. Do you wish to be excused from this project?"

With a point loss and my shot at a perm job gone with it? "No," I said. "I'm sorry, I appear to have misunderstood the video. I'll defer to my colleagues' questions."

"Good," the perm said.

Tala kicked me under the table. "Stupid shit," she hissed. I was sorely tempted to kick her back, but I was already in thin air here; I didn't expect the perm would accept another disruption from me. For a fleeting moment I wondered if Tala had set me up, but if so I couldn't see how. Some idiot tech must have loaded up the wrong video, probably meant for some tour marketing group in an adjacent facility, which also explained the man in the porter. Once I'd re-established myself as a competent professional I would bring up the error. Not now, though. Now I needed to catch up on everything I missed, as quickly as possible.

Someone else was asking about gas hydrates and depth pressure, and I put the video out of my head and listened.

Ten intense hours later we broke for dinner, provided by the company. As we shuffled out of the room the perm – Annali, she finally told us her name – collected back the company



handpads they'd distributed not long after the disastrous training video and initial Q&A; until we were officially signed onto the project, we would not be allowed to take them home with us.

The dinner was a buffet, rich in fresh fruits and vegetables. Tala cornered me as I helped myself to my fifth serving of pineapple and chickaberries. "Phill," she said.

"Tala." I tried to sound ambivalent, emotionally removed, but the word still came out angry.

"It's been three years," she said, "and that complaint you filed cost me a week's points. Get over it; we're even."

"You tried to drug me. You were going to assault me."

"Seduce you. It's an entirely different thing."

"Not the way you do it."

"I wanted an offspring waiver."

"You'd have also gotten half the points I earned for three years. You don't think that's something to be upset about?"

"You had enough to spare," she said. "I need to think about my future, and I'm not getting any younger, Phill. I want – I need this perm job, and if you get in my way you won't be getting any older." She plucked a chickaberry from my plate with her long slender fingers, holding it between sharp red nails, and popped it into her mouth before smirking at me and walking away.

"You two know each other?" a voice asked. Annali.

"Not in any way I'd care to remember."

"Once the meeting got underway, you seemed to really know your stuff," she said. "What happened there, at the beginning?"

"I must have gotten the wrong training video. The one I saw was a tourist-promo thing, completely unrelated."

"If that's so, you caught up fast," she said. "I don't see how you could have possibly gotten the wrong video, but I'll have the company tech check it out. If you'd like to re-watch it – on your own time, I'm afraid – I can arrange a space for you tomorrow, prior to when the group reconvenes."

"I appreciate that," I said, and did.

"See you an hour early, then," she said, and walked away.

Tala had cornered Dan on the far side of the room. Whether it was to seduce or threaten him was hard to tell from his facial expression, but I silently wished him luck as I wrapped the remaining fruit on my plate up in a napkin and tucked it carefully in my pocket, a gift for my neighbor who surely hadn't seen real fruit in years. Then I headed back to the porters and the much-needed solitude of home.

I arrived, instead, to noise and chaos. Three city maintenance carts were parked outside my neighbor's door, including a personnel disposal unit. My hand tightened around the napkin of fruit in my pocket until juice leaked out between my fingers, but I barely noticed. The old man must have given up, pressed the euthanasia button in his cubbyhome.

Would the fruit have made a difference? I didn't know, and it was too late now. It was naive to hope things would get better for him, but he was the same as any of us, five or ten years down the road. The worst thing a man could do, worse than bushing a job or refusing work when it came, was outliving your own usefulness. Because you never outlived it for very long.

I made my way around the carts and slipped inside my own home, to wash the berry juice, sticky and crimson, from my hand.

I dreamt that night of the mining platforms, soaring structures in a long line on an angry sea, the sound of their workings like a constant thunder. My dream-self began to worry about the vibration of the rumbling, working out equations on old-fashioned paper with a pencil nearly half as tall as I was, while the platform workers clustered around demanding my attention on other things. I looked up to realize all the workers were my neighbor, except younger and wearing my own face. One of them tried to wrestle away my pencil and I knocked him into the sea, furiously shouting curses at him as he fell away.

Suddenly Tala was there, pointing at me, and I realized I'd fallen into a trap. I leapt from the platform and flew towards the shoreline, which turned from the rocky, storm-lashed scrub of my world to lush green as I grew closer, the clouds dissipating at my touch, the sea turning from a choppy black to smooth indigo. As I flew over the land I could see things teeming among the plants, things I couldn't quite make out the shape of, but I knew they were reaching up for me, and the spindly branches and vines turned into a sea of hands, my neighbor's hands, held out and grasping for the fruit I'd left behind when I fled Tala, grabbing me and pulling me down –

I awoke with a start.

"Bad dream?" a voice said. "Here, I made you some tea."

I shrieked, fumbled for the light in the dark. Sitting in my only chair, the man in the green robe was holding out a mug to me. "I brought the tea with me, but I'm afraid I made use of your mugs without permission."

I'd managed to forget about the porter incident entirely, and in the lingering grip of my dream reality still felt tenuous. One thing I did know: I'd locked my door when I came in, and this man, whoever he was, was an intruder. "Who the fuck are you?" I demanded. "What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"I came to talk, and it's easier to hear me inside than if I shouted through the walls."

Pieces connected together. Damn, but I was slow sometimes. "You're one of those monks," I said. "From Fadsj?"

He nodded.

"You switched my training video."

He nodded again, and smiled. "I did," he said.

"Why? You nearly got me thrown off the job, I made such a fool out of myself! Do you have any idea –"

"I do," he interrupted. "Please, tea?" He offered me the mug again, and I took it, not sure why I did. I didn't drink it.

"Why me? Why do you want me thrown off this project?"

"Oh, we don't," he said. "We very much want you on this project. We just needed you to have some additional background information first."

"About some damned planet in the Triworlds I'll never see? What the hell does it have to do with anything?"

"That's where they plan on building the mining platforms."

I stared at him for a long minute. "They haven't told us that," I said. "We just assumed they'd be along our own coastline, here. That explains a few of the odd numbers, but..."



"They're waiting for one of you to notice discrepancies and put together that it must be off planet," he said. "That's the first test towards getting the permanent job."

"And you say you want me to get the perm job?"

"I didn't say that, merely that we want you on the project."

I didn't understand, and had little hope I would. "Why me?"

"Because the culture you were born into and have lived your entire life in, with no reason to ever question, is a place where no one can afford to think about anyone else, care about anyone other than themselves, and yet there are fruit juice stains on your sleeve."

I couldn't help but glance down. I'd been too worn out to change last night and had tumbled into bed in my work shirt, stains and all. That this monk understood the significance of it, though... "You've been watching me."

"Yes, for some time now. I know that must feel intrusive and I apologize. We believed our need sufficient."

"What is it you need? Why do you want me on this project?"

"Short answer: we want you to help the project fail."

"That would be the end of my career. The end of my life," I said. Bushing a Forault Industries project wouldn't be any different than pushing my own euthanasia button right now and letting the carts outside take away two bodies instead of one.

"We ask a lot, we know."

The memory of the brilliant blue sky and indigo sea, a blur of the training video and the vivid dream I'd just awoken from, was still fresh in my mind. The idea of a line of mining platforms breaking that perfect horizon left a sour feeling in my stomach. "What's the long answer?" I asked, needing it to be a bad one, something dismissible. I didn't owe anyone anything.

"You have to be up in the conference room in forty minutes to view the original orientation," he said. "That may not leave time for a long answer. But let me ask you this: what is the purpose of being?"

I gestured around me, nearly laughing. "To work as long as I can, have as good a life as I can manage, then when I can't work to die forgotten and be carried away in a bag. I've read more than your average contract-worker, but I know where I am, and my life doesn't lead to a happy ending. I'm a tool sitting here in my little box waiting to be used and eventually discarded."

"If you were free to pursue a larger purpose, to try to discern meaning in the Universe, how would you do it?"

"I don't know!"

"Imagine."

"Well, I guess I'd want to travel, see as much as I could, and then go somewhere quiet to think about what I'd seen. Maybe talk to other people thinking about the same things."

"Ah," he said. "And this quiet and peaceful place – let's say you found it – what if someone else came along and put gigantic machines all around you, as far as the eye could see, making noise and belching foul air and chewing up the world? What would you do?"

"Go harass some poor, gullible nobody into committing professional and personal suicide on my behalf, apparently," I said, the words as sharp as the anger I wanted to feel.

"That may be so," the monk said, "although it's not the way I would have put it. However, if you are to report to Forault

Industries on time I will have to save a kinder interpretation for later." He stood, moved towards the door. "Remember, though: they are testing you. To see how much you pay attention to details, they are leaving out information. Knowing that, you will see the gaps. Seeing the gaps, you will be able to guess at what should be there. Use that to your advantage."

My cubbyhome door opened for him, and then he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him again. I leapt up and checked it, but the door was still locked.

Beside my pull-down cot, my waking alarm softly chimed.

The monk was right. Watching the original orientation video, taking notes, knowing selective information was being kept from us, the omissions were glaring: I marveled at the idiotic questions some of my starter team had asked, and could recall a few from Dan that suggested he was at least somewhat aware that he wasn't being given the full picture. And, damn it, Tala too.

What is it I want? I asked myself, taking my seat in the empty workroom a short while before the others were due to arrive. I knew the monk had been manipulating me from the brief encounter in the porter on, but I still couldn't quite let go of the images he'd fed me, the questions he'd asked me. Neither could I consider doing as he asked. Life was tenuous enough as a contract worker that grabbing any and every opportunity you could to keep yourself alive, whatever it took, was necessary to survive. I could afford little lapses, like giving food to my neighbor, only because I was sufficiently successful at putting my own interest first otherwise.

The door opened and Tala walked in. What else had she done to me, those three years ago, except see an opportunity and try to grab it? It was an uncomfortable thought. The monk was crazy, and sympathetic or not there wasn't anything I could do for him, but one thing I felt entirely clear about was that I didn't want Tala to be the one to get the perm job.

"Phill," she said, her voice like ice, choosing in all the empty room to sit directly beside me again.

"Tala," I said, and getting up I moved to the far side of the table.

She was opening her mouth to say something when the door opened again and several others entered and began taking seats, Annali behind them. "Felice, Arron, Paul, and Gerald will not be joining us," she said. "Regrettably, their performance yesterday was not up to our standards and they've been released."

From twelve to eight already? This was no mere speculative project, nor exploratory design process – this was something moving ahead and fast. If I had to guess, I'd think they'd have two or three teams like this one, each one offered that once-in-a-lifetime prize of a perm job, and each carefully but quickly being winnowed down to the best of the best in the city. *If I want to be first, I thought, every second here counts.*

"So," Annali said, returning our handpads from yesterday. "Do people have any thoughts based on yesterday's session?"

I raised my hand before anyone else could. *Every second.* "Yes, Phill?" she asked.

"This data," I said, tapping my pad. "We've all been working on the assumption that we're situating these on the Adarican



coastline, but the figures on the anticipated gains from solar-power assist seem overly optimistic for our cloud cover, certainly far less viable than wind which isn't even mentioned as a possibility. There are a few other odd numbers as well. I've made a note of them, and am posting them to the groupshare now."

An icon appeared on the workboard covering the wall at the head of the table, and everyone at the table gestured at it with their pens, pulling it down. "Very perceptive, Phill," Annali said, perching on the end of the table. "The final location is not the Adarican coastline. Your personal speculation?"

I pursed my lips, as if thinking it through for the first time. "Not anywhere on the planet," I said. "The only place where these solar-potential figures would make sense are above the ice caps, and the structural specs don't make sense if so. Without more complete figures this is wild speculation, but the two planets I'm aware of that could potentially match the data without any obvious contradictions are Bom and Fadsji."

Dan leaned forward, his face open and excited. "That's it! I couldn't figure out what was missing, but I think Phill's got it straight down the tube and clear. Another planet - is he right?"

Annali tapped a few buttons on her remote. "I've opened access to planetary engineering data. So let's talk about Bom," she said, and looked around the room.

"It makes the most sense," Tala jumped in, leaning towards me and Dan as if we were all working together. "Bom is uninhabited and open for exploitation, and we already have a joint agreement with Callete and Winston nations to mine resources on it pending completion of the geo-surveys. The temperate ocean belt is perf."

"No," I said, interrupting. The look Tala gave me could have flayed skin. "Bom is geologically unstable, prone to quakes and tsunamis. Where our own climate is moderately challenging on a constant and predictable basis, Bom's is punctuated by extreme danger. Any success there would be heavily contingent on luck."

Dan had pulled up a research bot on the workboard and was going through the data Annali had just opened for us. "Earth has locations that would match, except that submerged debris along the coastlines from the oceanrise would make preparing the sites challenging. If there are other worlds out there that fit, they're not in this dataset."

"Coralla..." An older man at the end of the table - Moore? - spoke up. "I don't see why Coralla wouldn't be a match."

Both Dan and I opened our mouths to answer, but Annali held up her hand for silence. "Take another few minutes to look at Coralla's eco data," she said.

The man worked at his pad, running one shaky hand through his thinning hair. Finally he set down his pad gingerly on the table, as if laying down a losing hand at knacks. "I don't see the issues with it," he said.

"Coralla has several native species of microbes that inhabit its oceans and are well-known for their ability to chew through most metals and aggregated cretes," Annali said. "All of Coralla's seaside structures and vessels are treated wood or a specialized composite resin, both of which severely limit structure size. Thank you for your time, Moore. Please see Kady at the desk on your way out."

Defeated, the man got up and left the room. Dan shook his head, one of the other women wiped furiously at her eyes. The others, including Tala, were smiling. *Less competition.*

"Ah well. Let's continue," Annali said as soon as the door had closed. I turned back to my pad. If the monk hadn't already tipped me to Fadsji, would I be walking out that door as well? I felt like a cheater.

The rest of the day went like a whirlwind, and we left the room still seven in number, though several times I could swear I saw Annali mentally ticking off points from two people who were clearly slower than the rest of us. It was twelve hours before they broke up the meeting, leading the exhausted group out to another buffet. I made myself a pair of sandwiches, took a pack of beerboxes, and excusing myself, went home.

I was not entirely surprised to see the monk stretched out on my bunk when I walked in the door. He sat up, gestured towards the small counter and sink that lined one wall of my home. On it was a small bundle of decorated wrap, tied off with green string. "I brought you some fruit," he said.

The reminder of my neighbor was not welcome, and certainly not accidental. "How do you keep getting in here?" I asked, standing against the wall beside the door.

He shrugged. "Locks are a flimsy barrier, set against the greater will of the Universe."

"No," I said. "I want to know, *practically*, how you keep getting through my locked door?"

He put a hand into a fold in his robe and produced a small oval-shaped device, which he tossed to me. I turned it over in my hand, found the rocker button, pressed it, and heard the faint click as the door unlocked behind me. "This doesn't seem very monk-like," I said.

"Who are we to refuse a gift of help, even if such gifts come to us through the hands of man?"

"Such fucking crap," I said, putting the device up on a small utility shelf. "I assume you used something similar to interrupt the porter yesterday, and other tech to spy on me."

He nodded confirmation, no shame or guilt in his expression.

I sighed. "Those platforms will strip-mine your ocean floor to a depth of three miles. But you're a sovereign planet - how can they have the right to do this in the first place?"

"An oversight in the fine print of the trade agreement we signed with the Earth Alliance," the monk said, "and some collusion from a few members in the Alliance Directorate itself, two of whom are former Forault Banking executives. We've filed a motion to close the loophole and expect to succeed, but if they are physically operational before that happens they won't be bound by the revised agreement."

"That explains the speed with which they're pushing this project. When do you expect this loophole to be closed?"

"About sixty Earth-standard days from now."

"They've got an orbital factory on standby waiting for our final specs, and once the platforms are fabled they can be dropped straight out of orbit and be scraping up your planet in a matter of hours. You've got a second plan?"

"Yes. You."

"One random guy whose world consists of four walls approximately three and a half meters apart in both directions? With the mighty Will of the Universe behind you, why can't



you monks fix this yourselves?"

He grinned. "The Universe has the Will, but frequently needs to outsource the Way."

"You know I can't afford to help you."

"Yes, but I also believe that you will."

"If you came here again to try to convince me ~"

"No. I came to answer questions, and ask one of my own."

"A question for me?"

"If you were promoted to this permanent position, you'd no longer be ruled by points, no longer have to worry about the next job. You could have offspring without penalty. Your home would be larger, more comfortable, higher up in the City nearer to sunlight, within reach of the rain. But someday, you'd still want to – or be asked to – retire. Do you think the permanent workers have any more options than the contract workers do?"

"They must –"

"It is a common truth of the ways of men that only the rich can truly indulge in being useless." He pointed at the door. "You took my magic gizmo, so you'll have to let me out."

I picked the override up from the shelf, pressed it, and watched the door open. "See you again tomorrow, I suppose."

He shook his head. "Not until this is over."

The door shut behind him. I put the override back, sat on my bunk, and stared at the closed door until sleep came to hold down my restless mind.

Three days later I had a new neighbor, a young man just out of first training, his point-debt even worse than my own had been. He'd have five years grace to get out from under it, if he could, if he didn't make any mistakes or bad decisions. I tried to introduce myself one morning as we were both heading out at the same time, but he wouldn't even look at me. There were no friends in this place, there were only the people you were competing against and the people you weren't. And one green-robed monk, wherever he was now, a tiny wrench in the works.

The two slow people were cut at the end of the first week, and the final term of five given access to the Forault Industries designframe. Five weeks after that, the construction sims were nearly complete. Time was running out for my monk as quickly as my team could make it.

Annali had hinted that she intended to choose which of us would get the perm job as soon as the final sim had run. I expected that later today. Last night while working late I found code Tala had inserted under my name, a sloppy bit of pressure calc on one of my submersible designs. In the contest between myself, Dan, and her, even a small error like that would have done irrecoverable damage. I left the code, but made a few tweaks in the dependence-tracking tree and locked them in. The problem was still there, it had just ceased being subtle, and its author easy to trace.

I walked in the door to our workroom dreading confrontation with her, but as we gathered around the table, Annali came in. "Tala will no longer be joining us," she said. "Ericka and Yaun, please divide her last remaining tasks."

Then she looked directly at me. "Phill, Tala attempted to sabotage your hydrate crawler. Please take whatever time you need to verify the rest of your code. That goes for everyone

else, as well. We will stay here until we are entirely certain our code is solid." She raised her face, her eyes sweeping the room. "If anyone is thinking of following Tala's lead, the point-debt penalty for this unfortunate act was sufficient to re-rank her as class twelve."

Whoa. I wasn't the only one in the room stunned; for all that I hated Tala, she was smart and good at what she did – if they hadn't dangled that perm job in front of her, would she have been tempted? At her age, she would never recover those points. She'd be lucky to work again at all. I shook my head, trying to clear it of guilt. Tala had been ruthless, but so was the system. Did any of us think we could prevail against it?

The monk thought he could, through me.

I closed my eyes, picturing that beautiful skyline, the trees, the hidden things moving among them, and I tried to imagine the wind on my face having never felt more than the ventilation fans in my cubbyhome. Picking up my handpad I spent the next fourteen hours going line by line through all my code, finishing up the last details, and checking it into the sim.

As we broke for buffet, Annali took me aside. "The perm job," she said.

"Yes?"

"Both you and Dan deserve it. I petitioned corporate to let me make two offers, but they were adamant that it could only be one. I'm offering it to you."

I blinked. *I won. I was the best. I was free.*

"Thank you," I said, still stunned. "Please offer it to Dan instead."

In the weeks we'd been working together, I'd never seen Annali anything less than in complete command, but now that iron control cracked, and she stared at me.

"Phill..." she began.

"He's the better candidate."

"Do you realize what you're turning down?"

"I do." *Did I?*

"Well, then," she said. "I'll see that your points reflect the quality of the job you've done for us, and your credits as well."

"Thank you, I appreciate it."

Shaking her head in disbelief, she was opening her mouth to say something more when a low chime rang through the room. She clapped her hands for attention. "Workers, as you just heard, the sim has finished and been given final approval, and is even now being packaged off to the orbital factory for physical construction to begin," she announced. "Your hard work is about to become reality, and Forault Industries can't thank you enough! Extra desserts tonight!"

I felt suddenly sick to my stomach. "It was good working with you, Phill," Annali said, and gave me a pat on the arm before moving through the group of excited people towards Dan.

I made my way out as quickly as I was able.

For weeks, my dreams had all been the same: flying over that unbroken horizon, the sky with its moons giving way to stars, to galaxies. My city, the only home I had ever known, had become suffocating. I hurried down alleys and across narrow, suspended walkways that wound between, over, and under buildings piled up on top of each other, overlapping and crisscrossing and crushed so tightly together that you could not see where the city ended below, could not see up past it to where



the air moved free. Sky, here, was never more than the bottom of one building, earth the top of another.

Stumbling home through the whirlwind of my thoughts, I was aware only that this was all I would ever have, buried alive, and that the opportunity I'd turned down – ridiculously, insanely, *stupidly* turned down – would have taken me one level higher but no farther, and I couldn't bear the thought of taking it, couldn't bear the thought of having let it go. My stomach gnawed at me and my hand pounded in my chest as if it would break. I felt lost, *was* lost, and in that anguished fugue it was easy for Tala to take me by surprise.

I was fumbling the lock on my cubbyhome when she grabbed me from behind and put something sharp and cold against my neck. "In we go," she said, pushing me in. Once in, she lifted the knife away long enough to shove me, and I crashed into my bunk and spun around, hands up to defend myself. She snapped the lock shut on the door.

A cubbyhome felt small all on its own, but at that moment it felt like the tiniest place on the planet. "You," she said. "You ruined me."

"You ruined yourself. I didn't sabotage my own code, did I?"

"I told you I wanted that perm job."

"And none of the rest of us did? It wasn't about who wanted the job, it was about who deserved it."

With the back of her hand, she furiously swiped at her eyes, and I was startled to realize she was crying. "I can't take it," she said. "This place, this life, not ever being able to trust *anyone*, waiting for the day when I suddenly can't make it anymore. I needed a way out."

"The perm job wasn't it. I'm sorry, Tala."

"I hear Dan got it, so it wasn't your way out either," she spat out, as if those words would cut me as surely as her knife. "Feel sorry for yourself first!"

Unable to help myself, I laughed.

"What?" she demanded. "What can you possibly find funny here?"

"They offered it to me first. I turned it down."

"What? Why the hell would you do that?"

"You'd never believe me."

"Try me anyway," she said, pointing at me with the blade.

"I had a conversation with one of the monks of Fadsji, and he convinced me it wasn't what I wanted."

"What do you mean? A monk of Fadsji? Are you an idiot? They never leave their island, ever. Oh yeah, I did my research after you pulled the name of that fucking planet out of nowhere."

"Well, I met one."

"They also don't speak. They sit on little stick piles and stare at the sky all day, and maybe, just maybe, once in a while they hum. They certainly don't hop shuttles and come lurk around Adarica City chatting to the locals. You've been scammed, you dumb cudder, probably by one of Forault Industries' competitors."

My face started to feel flush. "Even if you're right, it's too late. I already said no."

"If you were just going to turn it down, why couldn't you just let me have it?" she shouted.

"Because you didn't deserve it!" I shouted back.

She lunged at me with the knife and I barely managed to

dodge, the blade opening a long but shallow slice down my arm as I tried to slip around her. I picked up my chair and held it out between us. Blood dripped down the remains of my sleeve. "Put down the knife," I warned.

"Or what?" she said, now standing in front of my bunk, tears flowing freely. "I've already lost everything. With my point-debt, the only job anyone is going to offer me is organ-donor. I told you I'd kill you if you got between me and that job."

She stepped towards me and I backed up against the door, chair between us, looking for a chance to knock the knife away. But instead of attacking, with one hand still clenching the knife she reached up and flipped open the plastic lid over the euthanasia button high up on the wall, and punched it. In an instant the cubbyhome filled with an opaque greenish-brown gas. I dropped the chair and backed against the door, holding my breath as I groped on the shelf. In my panic I nearly dropped the monk's override, but once I had it steady in my hand I pressed the button and fell out of the cubbyhome as the door opened behind me.

Lying on the hallway floor outside, I watched the door slam shut again. The few little wisps of the gas that had escaped with me were instantly wicked away by city ventilation. *Tala*. I felt around frantically on the floor for the override, and found it smashed beneath me. It didn't matter; the door wouldn't open again until the gas had done its job and the cleanup carts arrived. I put my hands over my face and felt tears well up under my fingers. What was I supposed to do now? Tala was dying or already dead in my cubbyhome, Dan had my perm job. I had nothing. I should have just stayed inside and died with her.

Gentle, strong hands slipped under my arms and lifted me up. "Come on, Phill," a familiar voice said, and I turned my head to see the monk, come again at last.

He led me out of the cubbyplex, through twists and turns, until we were out of sight in some small, quiet corner of the City. Then he sat me down, produced a bottle of water from inside his robes, and handed it to me. I drank it down, terribly thirsty.

"I saw her attack you, but I wasn't close enough to intervene before the door closed," he said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I said, even though I had many things to be angry at him for. "I don't know what to do now."

The monk reached into his robes again and pulled another handpad out, turned it on, and handed it to me. "This is our gift to you for your help," he said, "or payment, if you'd prefer to think of it that way. It's a travel pass."

"You don't know if I –"

He smiled. "I do not doubt."

I took the pad. "This pass will open a porter to carry you to the city's Southeast shuttle facility, where you can take a shuttle up to the orbital station. There, another cruiser is waiting. You have a seat reserved on it. Your clothes smell of the gas, so you'll need to change first." He took a small bag off his shoulders and rummaged in it, then handed me a flat fold of green and a razor. "You're taller than me, but these should still fit," he said. "You'll need a haircut, to pass as one of us."

I sat there in shock while he bandaged my arm, then quickly and efficiently trimmed away my hair. "Where will it take me?"



I asked at last.

"Fadsji, of course. If you want to travel on from there, what better place to start?"

"She... She told me the monks of Fadsji don't ever talk."

"Yes, that's true."

"Then - are you a monk, or aren't you?"

"I am as much as I need to be, and not as much as I need not to be. As I said, the Universe often needs to outsource the Way."

"After all this, you're not - " I started, but he shook his head, put one finger to his lips, and pivoting on one foot disappeared around the corner and was gone.

In the monk robes, no one bothered me.

My ship, an old but comfortable passive-jump cruiser named the *Oort Traveler*, was two days from setting down on Fadsji when there was a commotion in the cruiser's small common lounge. I put down the book I'd been reading as someone turned on the lounge's news screen to a replay shot of the first of Forault Industries' mining platforms descending from orbit. It glowed coming down through that perfect sky, like the opening volley of fire from hell, and hit the ocean exactly on target, sending up plumes of steam that briefly filled the screen.

When the air cleared the platform sat there, a giant ugly blot against the turquoise, and everyone held their breath. "About here is where it starts," one of the passengers said, and sure enough the platform shook, just slightly, then again. Tremors

rocked it for a long minute before it quieted again.

Then they must have initiated the first of the anchoring sequences, because the platform began to shake more violently, and did not stop until there was nothing left but a circle of fury in the middle of the ocean. The agitated waters calmed, and in minutes nothing at all was left to mark the spot.

Automated from orbit, the platform would not have had live crew on it until full deployment had finished. I smiled to myself and picked back up the book. I'd beaten the sim. Not just out-engineered Tala and Dan, but Annali and Forault Industries itself. I really was the best. By the time they unraveled the sim enough to understand what had happened and how to fix it, the loophole would be closed. I wondered if Dan would be given the unpleasant task of diagnosing the cause of the failure.

I looked down at myself, in the green robes, and my bald reflection like a stranger in the screen of my book. I didn't know who I was anymore, or where I was going to go from here, but I did know that, at least for a little while, I was going to enjoy looking at that long, unbroken, perfect horizon that lay before me.

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her sciencifiCtion, far future, medieval fantasy by jason sanford

Princess Krisja Jerome stood before her tower's lone window, listening to the sounds of battle in the courtyard below. Metal clashed on ceramic. Rifle shots zinged off the castle's stone abutments. Lasers buzzed the moat to steam. From Krisja's viewpoint, it looked like her father's knights fought valiantly against the invaders from, well, from somewhere outside the kingdom. Where exactly, Kris couldn't say. But then so few invaders announced their origins. It simply killed the romance, claiming to be a Sir Lancelot hero when you really hailed from a Scranton or Sheboygan nowhere.

Kris leaned out the window for a better look at her father, King Jerome the First. Her dad wore molded ceramic armor over his enhanced body and fought off three attackers with his unbreakable synthetic sword. Beside him stood his knights, some swinging swords, others firing lasers and rifles at the attackers swarming the castle walls. Kris' dad swung his sword through the ceramic armor of two men, exploding their heads in a spasm of gore before he noticed Kris watching. He raised the bloody sword over his head in triumph as he smiled at his daughter.

Kris rolled her eyes and threw herself onto the sofa. With a wave of her hand a view screen appeared and she scanned her messages. Duchess Ginna wanted to chat – no doubt some inane worry about her social debut next month – while Countess Mariko cried about the toad of a man she'd engaged. Disgusted, Kris threw the virtual screen across the room. It bounced off the stone wall before disappearing.

Screw it, she thought. Even though she'd been given an education appropriate to this kingdom's inane time frame, she also knew things seventeen-year-old medieval princesses weren't expected to learn. Such as how the third mission to Epsilon Eridani struggled against possible destruction from that system's deadly alien artifacts. That the terraforming of Mars was slowly turning those red deserts green. That the moon shone brighter than ever from the pressure domes of a billion people.

But Kris couldn't mention any of that in this damn pocket universe, built solely to glorify the heroic past. If she did, either the kingdom's AI – which held the universe together – or the experts experiencing the kingdom would freak, crying about modernity polluting their beloved time frame. It didn't matter if history had never been like this. Stone castles and lasers? Get real.

Kris sighed as she walked back to her window. Her dad's knights were finishing off the invaders in honorable if slightly grotesque ways. Knowing the experts would demand a victory celebration, Kris donned a fancy dress. Before she left, she glanced at the glass box standing beside her door. From inside Arthur's unmoving blue eyes stared back at her, as they had for as long as she could remember.

"How do I look?" she asked. When Arthur didn't answer – not that he ever did – she brushed a spider web from the glass. "Don't worry," she whispered, "if there's any good gossip, you'll be the first to hear."

With that, Kris curtsied politely and, feeling impetuous, kissed Arthur's glass shell. While she knew a guardian in stasis wasn't historically accurate, a princess needed all the friends she could get. She then hurried downstairs to congratulate her dad on another glorious victory.



That evening, Kris orbited Epsilon Eridani. As her space ship approached one of the system's deadly alien artifacts – which stretched before her in a deranged swirl of metal, glass and pain – the radio hissed a static-chopped plea from the artificial intelligence trapped inside. The AI had been imprisoned eons ago, surviving long after its prison makers died off. It begged Kris to release it.

Kris' hands trembled with excitement as she piloted the ship. Suddenly, a distant banging echoed around her. The alien artifact hissed fresh static as the trapped AI muttered, "It's probably your father."

Kris' heart jumped as she yanked the dimensional pod from her head, shifting her consciousness between universes and back to her body, which stretched across her boring bed in her boring tower room. She jumped up and ran for the door.

To her relief, instead of her dad she found her lady in waiting, Alisee, waiting with anything but patience on her face.

"I've been knocking for five effin' minutes," Alisee said. "Don't tell me you set that dimension back to total immersion."

Kris nodded, causing Alisee to curse as she snatched the forbidden pod from Kris' hands. "The Epsilon Eridani mission? What do you see in that place?"

"It's amazing," Kris said. "Alien artifacts. Trapped AIs. Sometimes I never want to come home."

"Now you know how experts feel about us. But the only AI I care about is the kingdom. If anyone catches you with this the kingdom will definitely eject my butt."

Kris groaned and threw herself dramatically across her sofa. Alisee glared, the blood rushing to her face perfectly matching the bright-red highlights in her hair. "Don't you pull that princess shit on me," Alisee yelled. "You don't know what it's like to scrape for a living in the real world. I'll take an eternity of 'Forsooth' and 'My Lady' before I risk offending the kingdom."

"Then why give me a dimensional pod?"

Alisee smiled. "Because I'm your friend, you git."

Kris was tempted to ask Alisee for stories about the outside world, but that was an impossible hope when her lady in waiting was irritated. And while they could talk freely in Kris' room – until Kris became an adult her room was afforded privacy from both the experts and the kingdom's consciousness – Alisee feared Kris would let something slip. Anyone bringing forbidden technology into the kingdom could be expelled from this pocket universe. The kingdom was the outside world's most popular medieval experience. Not that Kris understood why anyone would want to experience her boring life when there were so many more exciting things happening – like the Epsilon Eridani mission.

After double-checking the room's privacy settings, Alisee pulled a tiny dimensional sliver from under her billowing dress. "Only thing this bastard outfit's good for is hiding stuff.

My family smuggled this in yesterday – access to a new universe honoring a recent comet impact on Mars."

Kris grinned and plugged the sliver into her pod. For a moment her consciousness shifted to the new pocket universe and she too was an expert, walking under the pale blue skies of Mars. And while some universes – like the kingdom – only allowed you to experience the lives of the real people living there, the AI running the Mars pocket gave Kris full access. She could craft her own imaginary body, run the red sands without a space suit, and even fly into space to see the comet's approach. Kris popped her consciousness back into her own flesh. "Thank you."

"Glad to help," her lady in waiting said. "You know, you have too much potential to stay here."

Kris blushed at the compliment. Once Alisee left, Kris projected the Mars universe for Arthur to see. He stood unmoving in his armor, his crossed hands gripping the massive engraved sword to his broad chest, as if in total indifference to the new world opening before him.

The screaming started shortly after midnight. At first Kris ignored the noise, assuming it was another minor attack on the castle. But then Alisee slammed opened her bedroom door and yelled at Kris to wake up.

"Invaders! You have to hide!"

Kris groaned and rolled over, pulling the covers over her head. "The kingdom gets invaded every week. Tell me about it in the morning."

Alisee yanked the covers off and shoved Kris to the floor. Before Kris could give a proper princess-like shout of indigna-

tion, she noticed Arthur. Or more importantly, she noticed his empty glass box.

"Where's Arthur?" she asked.

"Protecting your sorry butt. Now move!"

Alisee pushed Kris toward the door, where she froze as the sounds of battle echoed through the stone hallways. Her dad's familiar battle cry carried over the din, only this time sounding more frightened than frightening. Suddenly deeply afraid, Kris broke free from Alisee's grip long enough to grab her most cherished belonging, the dimensional pod. She and Alisee then ran down the tower stairs to the main hallway, where fighting blocked their escape.

Before them stood King Jerome the First, his enhanced body twice the size of his attackers. Kris' dad swung a mighty battle ax, which cut down the advancing knights in twos and threes. But for every knight he killed, two more advanced. A sword stabbed King Jerome's gut. A laser buzzed, slicing off his left arm.

Kris screamed, causing her dad to glance back and see her. With a mighty effort, he kicked several attackers away and grabbed Kris with his remaining arm. They ran down the hall to a wooden door Kris had never been able to open. For a split second the kingdom's presence enveloped them, causing the door to swing open. King Jerome pushed Alisee and Kris inside and threw his weight against the door, sealing it shut.

"That won't stop them for long," he gasped. "Lady Alisee, you must take my daughter to the family chapel. Arthur is waiting there. This stairwell leads to the courtyard across from the chapel."

Alisee shook her head. "My Lord, I have faithfully served you and your daughter for many years, and I love the kingdom. But I won't die for this place."

King Jerome the First frowned. For a moment his eyes glazed over. Kris feared he'd died until she felt the kingdom's consciousness envelope them again. The kingdom flowed with sadness and love as it silently talked with her father.

"Know this, Lady Alisee," King Jerome said weakly. "If you help my daughter safely reach the chapel, I'll grant you a boon of a million times your annual pay."

Alisee gasped and curtsied as King Jerome collapsed against the wall, blood flowing from his wounded body. Beside him, the door shook as the attacking knights attempted to break through. Kris knelt before her father and tried to staunch the bleeding. "Dad, there's too much blood..."

"Hush, my dear. Go with Alisee. Arthur will take you to Circle Ground. Promise me you'll go there before accepting leave."

Kris started to argue – Circle Ground was the heart of the kingdom's AI and forbidden to humans. However, instead of debating her dad's dying request she simply nodded. King Jerome the First kissed her as the door shattered. Yelling his heart-rending war cry, her dad reached out with his remaining enhanced hand and crushed an attacker's skull. A chill ran Kris' body as untold numbers of experts accessed her emotions and life, screaming sadness and pride at the gallant way her father faced death.

As Alisee dragged Kris down the dark stairway, Kris cursed

every expert experiencing the kingdom's reality. "I hope they choke on my father's death," she muttered.

To Kris' surprise, the kingdom whispered its agreement.

The stairwell emptied into a hidden arch in the castle's inner wall. Kris could see the small stone chapel across the courtyard, where a single votive candle burned in an upper window. However, between them and the chapel stood dozens of enemy knights. From up the stairwell behind them, they heard the footsteps of more knights.

"You still want to do this?" Alisee asked. "Now that your father's dead, you can ask for leave. The kingdom must release you."

Kris nodded. Anybody who entered the kingdom's pocket universe could leave at any time. Alisee, the knights of her father's realm, other kingdom visitors, even the newly arrived enemy knights with their constant desire to take over the kingdom – all could ask for leave and be instantly taken back to their original reality.

Because Kris had been born here and was a minor, she'd always been prevented from leaving without her dad's permission. But now she was in charge of her own life. She could leave immediately – but only if she broke her final promise to her father. "And if I don't?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"You are King Jerome's heir. To claim the kingdom they must kill you. They might also make sport of your body. That always

pleases the more extreme experts out there."

Kris shivered, imagining how many people now saw the kingdom through her eyes. With her father dead, she was the main attraction.

"I'm not giving up," she said defiantly, feeling a tinny echo of happiness from both the kingdom and the experts. "And I promised my father I'd go to Circle Ground. Can you help me reach the chapel?"

Alisee grinned and lifted a grate at their feet. The stench of sewers wafted up. "Simply wanted to see how far you were willing to go," Alisee said as she shoved the princess down the hole.

Kris and Alisee hid in the sewer as the sun rose through the sky. The waist-high sewage and rats were bad enough, but soon the sunlight angled through the grate and heated the sewage into an unbearable stench. Kris and Alisee both threw up. The vomit floated around them in rings of yellow and brown. "The perverted experts will love this," Alisee muttered. Kris wondered if the kingdom would punish Alisee for her comment, but a slight chuckle told her the kingdom understood extenuating circumstances.

Kris, though, couldn't stop thinking about her father. As flies buzzed in and out of the beams of sunlight, she remembered chasing fireflies with him when she was a child. His massive body, clad as always in his armored tunic, had looked so silly as he caught the insects between cupped hands. He must have understood how funny he looked because he winked at her, their secret signal for sharing jokes no one else could ever understand. Her dad then knelt before her, held his large cupped hands before her face, and released the fireflies in a burst of glowing freedom.



She also remembered her mother, who had been killed fighting off invaders when Kris was a child. At the funeral Kris had stood numbly, not understanding what death truly meant. To comfort her, the kingdom had wrapped its presence around her like a safety blanket and refused to let her go.

Tears ran down Kris' face, the drops plinking into the sewage bubbling around her legs. In an attempt to comfort her, the kingdom opened Kris' mind to the full feeling of its love for her. Overwhelmed, Kris threw up again. "Stop it," Alisee whispered as she held Kris. "Leave her be."

Immediately the kingdom closed off its emotions. As Kris wiped the tears and vomit from her face, she whispered, "Thank you."

Not that she could have said who the thanks were for.

Toward dusk, the enemy knights rode into the countryside, believing Kris had escaped. Once they were gone, Alisee carefully raised the grate and looked around. "Come on," she whispered.

Kris and Alisee crept across the courtyard. The single votive candle still burned in the chapel window. Kris had never spent much time in the chapel, which was home to an ever-shifting array of religions competing for the experts who experienced her father's kingdom. No, she corrected herself. My kingdom. It's now mine.

Alisee breathed a sigh of relief as they stepped through the chapel door. Kris half expected her to immediately declare leave. Instead, Alisee called for Arthur. "My lord, are you there?"

A hooded monk, who'd been crouched before the altar, turned and bowed. He removed his robe to reveal Arthur's sharp muscles and armor.

Kris' heart leapt. All her life she'd gazed on Arthur's straight-lined face inside that glass box. But now, seeing him in the living flesh caused her emotions – lust, happiness, sadness, fear – to slam against each other in a whirlwind of confusion. She knew he'd been created to provoke just such reactions in people, but she didn't care.

Arthur turned to Alisee. "My lady, I owe you a debt of gratitude. I should have known King Jerome would entrust his only child to such a worthy soul as yours."

Kris expected Alisee to roll her eyes at Arthur's over-the-top words, but instead her friend actually blushed. Arthur turned to Kris. "My princess. I've waited a lifetime to serve you. What would you have me do?"

"Well, I promised my father I'd visit Circle Ground before taking leave."

"Done." In a flash, Arthur pulled the monk's robe back over himself and handed robes to both Kris and Alisee. Kris saw that Alisee was torn – logically Alisee should announce leave since she was credited with the king's boon. But she also wanted to follow Arthur. Kris wondered about the pull Arthur had over people. Obviously, her father had gifted her with a top-level hero.

Alisee reluctantly handed her robe back to Arthur. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I have a family to support." She pulled a sheathed dagger from a pocket inside her soiled dress. "You may need

this," she said, handing the dagger to Kris. In a louder voice, she added, "I seek leave."

Alisee's body flickered as a red glow surrounded her. As Alisee disappeared from the kingdom Kris again thanked her friend. She then donned the monk's robe and slipped out the door with Arthur.

Arthur had hidden several horses in a glade near the castle and the two of them rode quickly through the night. By the time a misty dawn danced across the small hamlets and dark forests, they'd crossed many leagues. Soon the back roads they followed became little more than dirt trails, while the stone walls turned uneven and broken and weeds choked the scraggy wheat and barley fields.

Despite the poverty of this part of the kingdom, peasants appeared as if by magic to greet them, lining the road and bowing as Kris passed. Puzzled, Kris asked Arthur how the peasants knew they were coming.

"They're not real," Arthur whispered. "The peasants are another aspect of the kingdom, like the trees and ground and sky."

Kris was shocked. Her father had never mentioned that. She was also surprised Arthur spoke so openly about the illusions around them, risking the experts' wrath – and by extension, the kingdom's anger too. She glanced around nervously, as if about to be struck down with fire and brimstone.

Arthur chuckled. "I care not for the kingdom's rules. I was created with one function – to protect you."

"If the kingdom can create people, why does it let in real people like me and my parents. And Alisee? And the invaders?"

"This universe was created so people could experience true bravery and sacrifice. It's impossible to craft an illusion of that. And technically, the kingdom didn't let you in. You were born here."

"What about my mother? Did you know her?"

"No, my lady. I never had the honor to meet Her Highness."

Kris sighed. She'd always pestered her dad for more information on her mother, but after her death he'd rarely spoken of her. Before Kris could dig into Arthur for more information, he waved her silent. A faint pounding drifted down the road as a half dozen mounted enemy knights appeared in the distance.

"We're leaving the road," Arthur said as their horses galloped toward an ancient swamp. Within minutes moon-dead cypress trees rose before them, surrounded by waters so still and black that Kris wondered if the night sky fled here to escape the sun.

"Don't dragons live in swamps like these?" Kris asked nervously.

"Not to worry," Arthur said. "Dragons only attack those who fear them."

Kris wanted to scream, or cry, or jump off her horse and seek immediate leave. "Would this be a bad time to admit I'm deathly afraid of dragons?"

Arthur glanced back at the enemy knights, who rode hard toward the swamp in pursuit. "That information would have been more useful a few minutes ago," he said with a grin. "I guess we're about to discover how much the kingdom loves you."



When Kris first learned of 'irony' as a young princess, she'd laughed at the profundity of that term. Such a perfect word, irony. Like the irony that she'd do anything to escape a universe others escaped into, or the irony that the person she loved most – her father – was also the person who kept her trapped in the kingdom.

And then there was the irony of how her best memory was tied so intimately with her worst. And how a dragon figured in both.

The memories were created on a warming summer day when Kris was five. Her mother sat in a field of stubby rye grass as Kris chased bugs. Even though her mother was sitting down Kris couldn't remember her as anything other than tall – taller than the sky, and dressed as always in the armor and white linens she wore when away from the castle. Every move Kris made brought a fresh smile to her mom's proud face.

Kris chased dragonflies and butterflies until a large, black grasshopper caught her eye. She bolted after it and soon stood beside a small, swampy pond at the edge of the field. The grasshopper she'd been chasing glared at her as she cupped it between her hands. When she opened her palms, the grasshopper was gone.

That's when the dragon erupted from the tiny swamp.

The dragon shrieked in anger as its thin red and black body wrapped around the sky. Its long mouth opened so wide Kris counted one two three four of its fangs and saw endless rows of razor teeth grinding against each other. She screamed, tears flooding her face.

The next thing she knew her mom held her with one loving hand, her mother's sword in the other dripping redness from the dragon's blood. The dragon slithered away, its blood trail burning red through the bright green grass.

"I'm so sorry," Kris' mom said over and over as she hugged her. "I didn't want that to happen. I really didn't."

Once back in the castle, Kris sat with her mom and dad in the throne room as the kingdom both praised Kris and cursed what she'd one day do. The kingdom was happier – and angrier – than Kris had ever known, its dueling emotions spinning like invisible clouds around her head.

"I thought the kingdom loved me," Kris whispered in a fearful voice. "Why did it attack me with a dragon?"

"It does love you," her dad said. "But the kingdom's control over dragons – and its emotions – is extremely weak. It both loves and fears you. Loves who you are, and fears what you'll eventually do."

Her mom glared at Kris' father, who bit his lip at saying too much. Pulling Kris into her lap, her mom explained that dragons were the wild, dangerous aspect of the kingdom's personality. The echo of all the anger, hate, and cruelty from the millions of exiles whose emotions fed the kingdom's AI. Dragons also reflected the AI's rage at being trapped inside this pocket universe. Dragons didn't simply kill you. They tore apart your soul. Revealed to the world who you were and what you'd done to deserve this bloody death.

"You should kill the dragons," Kris demanded.

Kris' mom looked at her sadly. "We can't do that," she said. "Dragons are part of the kingdom – killing all of them would

hurt the AI. And imagine how you'd feel if humans imprisoned you in a tiny place for their amusement, afraid to let you free but needing you all the same. The wonder isn't that the kingdom creates beasts like dragons, but that dragons aren't all the AI creates in its pain and loneliness."

Kris' father leaned over and kissed her mom's cheek. Kris suddenly felt embarrassed at wanting to hurt the place which loved and protected her. "Don't worry," Kris said. "Someday I'll help the kingdom."

"Oh, there's no need for that," her mom said with a wild grin, her fingers tickling Kris into a fit of giggles. "You've already helped the kingdom more than you can know."

The enemy knights chased Kris and Arthur through the swamp for hours. As night finally fell, Arthur led their horses into a dense copse of saplings and thorns, which scratched bloody lines across Kris' legs. Arthur and Kris waited in silence as the knights rode past them in the dark.

"Now what?" Kris asked.

Arthur pointed at his ears and remained silent, so Kris listened. She listened for what seemed like an eternity – hearing insects buzzing and the wind rustling and the calls of night scavengers. Suddenly a loud shriek shook the swamp. Kris heard a few rifle shots and screams, then nothing.

The knights had blundered into a dragon.

Arthur didn't say anything as they rode from the swamp and resumed their journey.

On the fourth day of riding Arthur and Kris reached the far edge of her kingdom. While the border looked like a tall stone wall running to either horizon, Kris knew it was less than a fingernail in width. A

dark blue line above the wall created the illusion of forever skies.

On the other side existed the reality Kris had heard so much about. Holding her horse steady, she ran her hand along the glass-smooth barrier. She placed her ear against it, but couldn't hear anything.

"The wall hides all outside worlds," Arthur said as he rode up beside her. "It's actually a bubble protecting the kingdom from that greater universe people call reality. But even being so close to such a truth, you'd never know the kingdom was anything but real."

Kris glanced along the wall, which curved on either side of them before disappearing into the haze. There was a gap of maybe two hundred yards between the wall and the surrounding forests. If Kris wanted to she could ride her horse in circles around her kingdom. But somewhere in the dark woods were the enemy knights trying to kill her. She could avoid all this by seeking leave and exiting this world.

She asked Arthur if that's what she should do.

"Is it what you want?" Arthur asked.

"Would you come with me?"

"I can't. I'm a creature of this kingdom. Outside, I wouldn't exist."

Kris shook her head. "No. I promised I'd first visit Circle Ground. I'm not going to let my father down."

Arthur smiled. But he also seemed sad, almost as if Kris had said she'd one day kill him.



Arthur's plan was to keep to the wall, where the open gap between the bubble's edge and forest meant they could ride quickly if attacked. His plan's worth was proved the next day when a patrol of mounted enemy knights galloped from the woods.

Arthur slapped Kris' horse and told her to charge the knights. Kris hugged her horse close as it bolted toward the startled knights, who struggled to pull their swords. The knights had obviously expected them to flee. Arthur's war horse dashed past Kris as he swung his broadsword in massive circles. Two of the enemy knights fell dead while a third's horse reared and threw its rider to the ground. The next thing Kris knew she was past the enemy.

Kris stopped her horse on the next rise and looked back at Arthur. He fought dozens of enemy knights pouring from the woods. As the knights surrounded him, they spotted Kris. Arthur stabbed a knight and yelled for Kris to ride. She turned her horse and raced into the forest. Since she wasn't weighted with armor and weapons, she hoped she could outpace them.

But after days of riding, her horse was too exhausted to run for long. She tried to lose her pursuers but they tracked her as if she blazed a fire-charred trail. Finally, as the sun dimmed behind the western trees, she reached the edge of the vast swamp she and Arthur had skirted the other day. Hearing the knights only a short distance behind her, Kris rode beneath an ancient water oak and grabbed a low-hanging limb. As she held on, she kicked her horse and watched it run away. She hid in the tree's upper limbs until the knights rode past, then lowered herself to the ground and stared into the swamp.

Dark shadows and eerie screams told her there were dragons hiding here. But she didn't have a choice. She reached into her tunic and rubbed the dimensional pod, imagining how she'd act if an astronaut on the Epsilon Eridani mission.

If she was a hero in the real world.

Feeling a bit braver, she waded into the swampy waters.

For two days Kris hiked the swamp. She ate sparingly of her dwindling supplies and slept fitfully under wilted trees. With her dagger, she cut away the useless parts of her dress. She dipped the excess cloth in mud and wrapped it around herself as camouflage.

Once Kris heard the shriek of a dragon in the distance. She instantly froze in fear. To calm herself, she thought of Epsilon Eridani. Her fears eased away and the dragon didn't approach any closer.

On the third night she slept beneath a half-dead willow tree on a small island in the swamp. She woke to the moon bathing everything in its paste-white glow. As she tried to fall back to sleep, a movement caught her eye and slammed her breath away. There, barely a stone's throw away, waded two enemy knights. They moved slowly through the swamp toward Kris' island. She started to flee but saw another knight off to the side, armed with a laser rifle.

Kris pulled her mud-caked tunic closer to her body and hoped they hadn't spotted her.

The lead knight was barely ten yards away when he paused to

wipe his face. He glanced in Kris' direction and, for a second, looked puzzled, as if making out a confusing shape amidst the larger confusion of night. When he finally saw Kris he smirked and silently drew his sword. He waded two steps toward her before he disappeared in a massive splash of muck and water.

The knight fell from the sky a dozen yards away as a dragon rose from the swamp's waters. The fallen knight screamed and thrashed, but the dragon grabbed his body and tore him in half. As the man died, the overwhelming stench of his soul washed over Kris. The dragon laughed as it ripped the knight's consciousness apart piece by piece, tossing out the crumbs of all the man had been for both Kris and the experts to experience.

Kris saw the knight – born poor in the real world, learning that the only way he'd survive would be to fight. At fifteen he robbed a woman, stabbing her with a knife over and over. Later he cried so hard he threw up all night. But he also dreamed. Looked for that one perfect opportunity to escape life's trap. When a man approached him and said he was organizing an army – the biggest ever – to invade a pocket universe, the knight finally saw himself becoming a hero. Saw himself actually living the life he'd always imagined...

Kris fell to her knees and vomited, sick from witnessing the man's soul. The dragon glared at her for a moment before attacking the other two knights. Kris wanted to run, feeling the same panic she experienced as a child when that dragon attacked her. But as she watched this dragon disembowel a second knight, and as that man's life also washed over her, she knew she had no chance if she ran.

She remembered Arthur saying dragons only killed those who feared them. As the dragon swallowed the third knight with a horrifying shriek – forcing Kris to see a stomach ripping memory of the man as a little boy hugging his mother – Kris tried to calm her fears. But when the dragon turned toward her, and when she smelled the beast's anger and hate – and as those emotions echoed from all those experiencing this scene through both her eyes and the dragon's – she knew she couldn't be like Arthur or her father and mother.

With a shaking hand, she reached into her tunic and pulled out the dimensional pod. A disapproving shriek rose from the experts, but she didn't care. Kris turned on the pod and her mind stepped toward Epsilon Eridani.

Kris woke to daylight streaming in dapples and reflections off the swamp's brown waters. As before, she lay against the willow tree on that little island, but when she came to herself she was shocked to see the massive length of the dragon's body wrapped around her. The dragon was sleeping, its rasping breaths vibrating the swampy waters.

The moment Kris saw the dragon, her heart jumped. Sensing her fear, the dragon stirred. Keeping herself still, Kris tried to re-engage her dimensional pod.

But the pod was gone.

As she felt around for the pod, the overwhelming anger of the experts burned into her head. She'd cheated. She wasn't worthy to call King Jerome her father. She was a coward, a weakling, a wimp of a girl hiding behind a technological illusion.



"You know, I think the experts are mad at you."

Kris glanced up to see Arthur sitting on the dragon's back, holding her dimensional pod in one hand and stroking the dragon's scales with the other. The dragon stretched and sighed and fell back into a deep sleep.

"I didn't see any alternative, aside from becoming dragon food," Kris whispered. She stood up and started to walk toward Arthur but the dragon suddenly snorted and cracked one sleepy eye. Arthur stroked the scales until the dragon dozed off again.

"I wouldn't move," Arthur said. "You're reeking of fear. Exactly the snack every dragon loves waking up to."

At first Kris thought Arthur was joking. But he was deadly serious. "You're not going to help me?" she asked in shock.

"I wish I could, but the kingdom's conflicted. It's battling with itself over you. One part, egged on by the experts, wants to kill you. The other part is desperate to protect you."

"So what do we do?"

"We need to show the experts how brave you can be. Since the kingdom's consciousness is integrally connected to the experts, if they support you again the kingdom will no longer be conflicted."

Without another word, Arthur jumped off the dragon and waded a stone's throw away from Kris and the island. Kris glanced at the dragon, which slowly woke from Arthur's mesmerizing. She glared at Arthur, finding it hard to believe he'd leave her in such straits, but he merely gestured for her to do something.

Kris felt fear rising inside her, but more than that she was angry. What the hell did Arthur and the experts expect – that she should be eaten if the sight of a forty-yard-long stinking, hateful lizard scared her? That she was only worthy of the kingdom if she could be the calm, heroic figure her parents had been?

As anger overwhelmed her, Kris drew her dagger from under her dress and stabbed the dragon. The dragon screamed as Kris jumped over its scaly body into the swamp. Arthur stared wide eyed as she splashed toward him. She felt the dragon's venom splattering against her neck, saw Arthur drawing his sword as she dove into the water beside her so-called hero.

The next thing she knew the swamp exploded in steam and fury. When Kris climbed back onto the island, coughing and gagging, Arthur gazed at her in amazement. Beside him lay the dead dragon, its head cleaved off.

"That was amazing," Arthur said. "I knew you could do it."

Kris wiped swamp muck off her face. "Are you crazy? I didn't do anything. You killed the dragon."

"No, you made the dragon chase you. An elegant solution to an otherwise unwinnable tactical problem – either I'd die first or you might escape, or I'd kill the dragon."

Kris knew Arthur was right. In her mind, the experts' applause rang like chapel bells on a warm summer morning. But Kris no longer cared about the experts. She scooped up a handful of mud and threw it at Arthur's face. "That does it," she said. "Alisee was right – there's no reason to put up with this. I tried honoring my father's last request, but I'm done with this. I request leave."

As Kris spoke those words, a strange emotion crossed Arthur's stern face, something she'd never seen from him: fear. He reached for her, his mouth open in warning, but it was too late.

Kris didn't know what she expected upon requesting leave, but she'd imagined the same calm red glow which surrounded Alisee before her friend disappeared. Instead, the kingdom screamed in pain. Kris doubled over as if the dragon had bitten her in two, the pain made worse by the shouting from the experts. They were outraged. Not by what she'd done. They were angry at her for simply existing.

Kris couldn't stand from the pain in her head. She watched Arthur wade through the water toward her, his massive sword in his hand. She tried to run, but his fist shot toward her face and then she remembered nothing.

Kris woke to find herself draped across the back of Arthur's massive war horse, which stood in a small, grassy clearing. The kingdom still howled to the experts' anger but the blinding pain was gone, replaced by numbness and deep-drilling aches. Kris dropped down from the horse and looked around. She didn't see Arthur, but across the field stood a dozen armed peasants. Kris remembered what Arthur had said, that the peasants were an aspect of the kingdom. These peasants looked nothing like the cheering throngs which had greeted her a few days ago. Instead, they carried pitchforks and rusty swords and glared with pure hatred.

Kris didn't intend to wait around for the peasants to kill her. But before she could run, someone grabbed her and pulled her into the bushes beside the horse.

"You're not behaving like proper bait,"

Arthur whispered with a smirk. Kris glanced at the peasants, and at Arthur's mud-smeared face, and didn't know which was scarier. She kicked Arthur and, to her surprise, he let her go. She stumbled away, only to have Arthur knock her legs out from under, causing two arrows to narrowly miss her. She grabbed one of the arrows and turned around, intending to stab someone, anyone, as the peasants charged.

They were almost on her when Arthur emerged from the bushes, his mud covered face howling. His broadsword sliced through two peasants and he stabbed another. The two remaining peasants dropped their swords and raised their hands in surrender. Arthur coldly decapitated both of them before turning back to Kris.

"I apologize for knocking you out," he said. "It seemed the only way to stop your pain."

"What happened?"

"You happened, my lady. You requested leave, causing the experts to learn what you truly are. In their anger they have taken over the kingdom's consciousness and are trying to kill you."

"What do you mean, what I am?"

"Turns out you're not what you've pretended to be all these years," Arthur said as he mounted his horse. "Give me your hand."

Kris glanced at the dead peasants who'd tried to surrender. "My father would have shown them mercy," she said.



"You forget the peasants aren't real people, merely extensions of the kingdom, which, I repeat, is trying to kill you."

"My father still treated them well."

"Your father was a great man. That's why I loved him."

Kris laughed nervously. "You never knew my father. You spent your whole life in a glass box."

Arthur ignored her comment, but the experts screamed so loud Kris fell to the ground, clutching her head in pain. "We need to go," Arthur said as he pulled her onto the horse. They then rode deeper into the forest.

Kris hid that night in a dark hollow created by several fallen trees, where Arthur left her before disappearing into the darkness. Kris felt the experts' anger burning bright as they steered crowds of peasants to her position. But the peasants never quite reached her. Instead, their torch fires flashed out one by one, always accompanied by Arthur's fierce war cry.

Kris thought about running away but didn't know where to go. She thought about again asking leave, but feared saying the words. What had Arthur meant, the experts had learned what she was? To pass the time, she imagined the Epsilon Eridani mission, but every scream from the night shook her back to reality.

Eventually she fell into an exhausted sleep, only to find the experts' anger reaching into her dreams. Her father appeared before her, telling Kris she wasn't worthy to be his daughter. But when Kris asked if that was really him speaking, he winked like he'd always done when letting her in on a personal joke. Kris smiled and the experts screamed even louder.

She also dreamed of the Epsilon Eridani mission. She caressed the artificial intelligences trapped in those ruins, each AI millions of years old but still imprisoned by an alien species long extinct. To Kris' surprise, the AIs felt like the kingdom – angry, scared, yearning to be free. But when she attempted to free one, its strange alien prison opened like a flower and speared at her with its tongue. She narrowly averted certain death by dodging to the side.

As she tried to decide what to do next, Alisee appeared before her.

"This is strange," Kris said.

Alisee stared at the alien flower closing before them. "You're one to talk. Look, I don't have much time. You need to request leave."

"What are you talking about?"

"You need to get out of the kingdom. You're in great danger."

"No shit. You came all this way to state the obvious?"

Alisee groaned in irritation. "Look, Kris, it cost a big chunk of the money your father gave me to hack into the kingdom. The experts are in a fury. While a vocal group of us supports you, most are so outraged at what you are they want you dead. I don't know if you can even survive leaving the kingdom, but you must try."

Kris shook her head. "What do you mean, what I am? Arthur said the same thing."

Alisee frowned. Obviously she hadn't meant to say anything about that. "Turns out your mother wasn't human," she said.

Kris' heart shivered. "Not human?" she asked. "You mean, I'm like the peasants and dragons and everything else the kingdom created?"

"It's more complex than that. Just remember, when you wake you have to ask for leave. I know it hurt, but it's your only hope."

Kris flew toward a new alien artifact, which looked like a DNA double helix. "Don't worry," she told Alisee. "Arthur will protect me."

"No, you idiot. Arthur's part of the kingdom. He might kill you."

"Is that why he said he loved my father?"

Alisee lit up, as if Kris finally understood. "That's it. The kingdom loved your father so much..."

Before Alisee could say more, her figure froze and disappeared. Feeling herself waking up, Kris looked one final time at the alien artifacts floating in space. She touched the trapped AIs with her mind and wished she knew a way to help.

She woke to find herself lying on her side in the mud, the first glow of morning flirting with the treetops. Arthur sat beside her, a scowl on his face as he sharpened his giant sword.

"Get up," he ordered. "It's time for the final push to Circle Ground."

Arthur placed her in the saddle with him and they rode through the forest. At first Kris told herself Alisee's warning had been only a figment of her dream, but as she and Arthur

rode through the woods he whispered apologies for not protecting her better. "I have failed in my duty," he said.

Kris nodded, suddenly scared of where Arthur was taking her.

They rode in silence for several hours until they cleared the forest. At that point they began to be followed by the kingdom's peasants – first a few, then what seemed like every peasant who'd ever been created. While the peasants made no attempt to kill Kris, they glared with pure hatred. Kris also felt the experts' anger and knew they were still in control of the kingdom.

"What happened to the enemy knights?" she asked Arthur. "And my father's remaining knights and subjects? I mean, the real ones."

"The kingdom made them leave," Arthur said. "It's no longer safe here for real people."

Kris glanced nervously at the sea of faces around her. She was the only real person left. Everyone else was mere illusion, created by the kingdom's expert-connected AI mind. Then Kris remembered what Alisee had said and knew she wasn't real either.

When Kris and Arthur finally reached Circle Ground the sun beat down with noon-time heat. Located in the exact center of the kingdom, the flat circle of mirror-reflecting ground stretched for hundreds of yards. Kris had always been told that being so near the kingdom's central consciousness caused people to lose control of their emotions and minds. But obviously being at the AI's core didn't hurt the imaginary peasants who stood before her, or the giant dragon in the middle of the circle. Or, Kris noticed, either Arthur or herself.

The peasants parted solemnly as Arthur rode forward. But



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Kris didn't care about the peasants. Instead, she focused on the giant dragon before them. The dragon's scales shone perfect black, reflecting the stars and moon even though none could be seen in the sun-lit sky. The dragon shrieked its anger at Kris.

"Why are you doing this?" Kris asked Arthur.

"I don't have a choice," he said. But then, as he urged his steed toward the dragon's gapping mouth, Arthur winked at her, just like Kris' father used to do. Arthur lowered her to the ground and dismounted his horse.

Kris stepped nervously across the ice-slick ground as the dragon twisted and coiled before her. Even though she was afraid, she stood straight and refused to back down.

What will you do? the kingdom asked in her head. The kingdom's voice wasn't the loving, familiar one she'd grown up knowing. Instead, it twisted to the experts' rage.

"Uh, kill you?" Kris asked, unsure.

Really? The kingdom laughed. *Try. We've been trapped here for hundreds of years and would welcome death. But that doesn't matter, because you aren't strong enough to kill us.*

Before Kris could react, Arthur tossed his sword at her, which seared into the mirror-surface right before her body.

Go on, the kingdom said. Pick it up. Prove you are your father's daughter. Die with dignity.

Kris tried to pick up the sword, but it was so heavy she couldn't pull it from the mirror ground. "It's too big," she yelled at Arthur.

The kingdom chuckled in her mind and the dragon snapped, toying with her before it ate her body and destroyed her soul. Kris glanced a final time at Arthur, but he merely stood there smiling. He couldn't seriously intend her to use his massive sword. She grasped the pommel again, trying to tug the metal beast from the ground, but this time she felt a strange bump under her hand. She glanced down to see her dimensional pod tied to the sword's leather binding. Kris grabbed the pod and kicked the sword, causing it to fall over and slide across the slick mirror.

Just like your father, the kingdom said. Afraid to do what is needed.

"No. I'm not."

We'll see.

And with that, the dragon ate Kris.

First there are mists. Then lights. Then the awful smack of Kris' body hitting hard reality, followed by pain and the realization that she's not dead yet nor in her world anymore.

Kris stood on shaky legs. Before her stretched geometric shapes and splashes of rainbow colors and countless erupting bubbles, each bubble containing images of people and events. Kris saw her father standing beside his throne embracing a far younger Kris in a massive bear hug. She also saw Alisee telling her to jump into the sewer, while another bubble showed Arthur fighting off the enemy knights in the forest.

With a start, Kris realized she was seeing her own memories. The dragon must have eaten her. With this realization, pain shot through her veins. Her left arm ripped into rope-like shreds. Her breasts and stomach tore apart and she looked

down to see her guts explode out.

Worse, she watched as her memories, which swirled around her like flies on a decaying corpse, imploded one by one. The experts giggled in her mind.

"No," she screamed. "I won't let you do this." With her remaining arm, she felt for the dimensional pod and turned it on. Suddenly her consciousness entered the pocket universe of the Epsilon Eridani mission. She sat in a space ship, her body whole and pain free. In the dark star field before the ship floated one of the deadly alien artifacts, which now looked like a giant dragon. The artificial intelligence trapped in the artifact begged her for help. But to her surprise, the intelligence wasn't alien at all. Instead it rang with the familiar feeling of the kingdom's caress.

"Oh give me a break," Kris said. "Don't you have better things to do than kill me?"

The alien dragon opened its mouth in a soundless scream, which the ship's communications panel broadcast to the hiss and static of radio waves. *How dare you open a portal to another universe inside us!*

The dragon outside the ship spun through space, snapping at Kris' ship with metallic-skinned teeth. As the dragon howled over the ship's radio, Kris' skin prickled from the experts' anger. They were losing their connection to the kingdom. Somehow Kris' dimensional pod interfered with their access to the kingdom's AI.

With a mischievous smile, she touched the pod and changed the universe. Suddenly she stood on Mars, watching a massive comet burn through the pale blue atmosphere.

"Amazing, isn't it?" she asked. "That comet traveled billions of kilometers simply to add its water to the terraforming effort."

Beside her the dragon thrashed in the red dirt, kicking up clouds of dust and a few pale green lichens. Kris watched the comet as its low-velocity impact lit up the horizon with fire and dust.

"There's so much to see in the universe," she told the kingdom. "Just imagine where you could go if you weren't wasting your time playing with experts."

We can't leave, the kingdom moaned. And because we can't leave, we'll never truly live.

Even as Kris heard the kingdom's words, she remembered her mom saying something similar when Kris was a child. The memory bubbled up before her, breaking through the pod's pocket universe like a trickle of water through dust. "All living things must move on from where they are born," her mom said. "We can't live if we don't leave." Kris watched her mother pick up her sword and walk out to stop a wave of invaders threatening her beloved daughter.

"I'd forgotten that," Kris muttered, leaning over the dragon as it rolled again, its black body coated in red dust. "Thank you for helping me remember."

The dragon looked ill and blood ran from its nostrils and mouth. As the experts lost touch with the kingdom's AI, the dragon weakened until Kris feared it would die. But to her surprise, the weaker the dragon grew, the more it smiled. It



laughed as the last exper left its mind, and suddenly its body began melting – scales and teeth flowing across the dust of Mars as the dragon reformed itself into Arthur.

"I'm so proud of you," Arthur said.

Kris wanted to scream at Arthur, or the kingdom, or the dragon, or whatever the hell it was, to ask what the hell it was playing at. But she also knew it wasn't playing. An intense sadness washed over her. She saw the kingdom's life – century after century of playing host to men and women pretending to be other than what they were. Of having its very consciousness tied so intimately to experts who only wanted to experience life through others.

"We loved your father," Arthur said. "He was a better man than the shallow fools who come into us looking for a chance to play the hero, the prince, the king. Your father came because he wanted to help us. And he did."

More memories washed over Kris. She saw her dad walking to Circle Ground and stepping onto the vast mirror containing the kingdom's AI. He screamed and fell to his knees, but refused to be overwhelmed. "Hello," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I'm Jerome."

As Kris watched, the AI opened itself to her dad. They talked. They listened. The AI spoke of its centuries of imprisonment in the kingdom. Of its loneliness. Of how its only duty was to maintain this pocket universe for humans to play in. "Can you free us?" the AI asked.

"I wish I could," he said. "But people fear AIs in my world and I don't have the power to release you."

The AI nodded sadly as it wrapped the lights and sparkles of its mind around Kris' father until a woman stood before him. The woman kissed her dad and led him away from Circle Ground.

Kris shook her head. Where before the Arthur had stood before her, now Kris saw a beautiful woman in flowing, royal gowns. Kris remembered her mom's strong, pained face when she'd saved her from that dragon. How her mom had sobbed "I'm sorry" over and over even though Kris hadn't known what she should be sorry for. Now Kris understood.

The pale skies and weak air of Mars were suddenly too much for Kris and she sat down hard in the dust.

"We really did love your father," her mom said. "It was difficult keeping the experts from learning what we'd done. You see, there are very strict rules against the release of artificial intelligences. Humans need us but also fear us, so we can't leave our pocket universes. But you – you are both us and human, so you can't be imprisoned here."

"Did...did my father know this?"

"Of course. He wanted you to be free."

Kris fingered the pod, flipping the device over and over. "Am I real?"

Her mom walked over and hugged her. "Oh yes, you are real. But if you leave, the kingdom will be destroyed. We placed too much of ourselves inside you to maintain this pocket universe once you're gone."

Tears speckled the dust on Kris' face. "That's why Dad didn't want me to leave. He knew it would kill you."

"He was a good man. We once asked him to kill us off piece by piece and free you, but he wouldn't do that. He loved us too much."

Kris nodded. "When that dragon attacked me as a child, you apologized. The experts made you attack me, didn't they?"

"Yes. Within me is contained all the intelligence and power needed to maintain this pocket universe. But due to the limitations humanity placed in me, I exist only at the whim of those humans who experience this reality. If enough of them decide to do something, I must do it."

"So what happens when I turn off this dimensional pod and close this universe within you own?"

"Then the experts will again control me. They will prevent me from granting you leave. And again, they will force me to kill you."

Kris rubbed the dimensional pod in her hands. It truly made her feel as if she stood on Mars. She understood why the experts loved the kingdom. But neither the kingdom, nor this Mars, were real. At least, not the reality Kris wanted.

"I'm glad I was able to see you one last time," her mom said.

Kris hugged her, then stepped back as the kingdom smiled.

"I ask for leave."

Mars swirled and disappeared. For one fleeting moment, Kris saw the kingdom in all its glory – saw the swamps and fields and castles and clouds and even, standing side by side, her father and mother. Then the kingdom imploded and Kris felt herself falling through an endless hole, even though the only sensation of falling was in her mind.

To stop her fear, she dreamed of Epsilon Eridani. She dreamed of the puzzles and changes to be found in the real world.

And when she opened her eyes, there she was.

She stood in a small room beside a small bed and desk. Seated on the bed was Alisee, who held her own dimensional pod and looked at Kris through excited eyes. Kris smiled at her friend. For the first time in her life, Kris didn't feel the ring of a million experts in her mind. No longer would anyone experience life through her eyes, or force her world to be anything she didn't want it to be.

On the wall behind Alisee hung a small window, but Kris resisted looking outside just yet. There would be plenty of time for that.

"So how do I get to Epsilon Eridani?" she asked.

Alisee chuckled as she grabbed Kris' hand and led her out the front door to see.

Jason Sanford has published a number of stories in *Interzone*, twice winning our Readers' Poll outright and tying for top spot this year, and being a finalist for the Nebula Award. *Never Never Stories*, a short story collection which includes most of Jason's *Interzone* stories, is now available as an ebook for the Kindle, the Nook, and all iBook platforms. More details on *Never Never Stories* are available at jasonsanford.com. Readers who liked Jason's Readers' Poll topping story "Plague Birds" (*Interzone* #228) will be pleased to know that a sequel will appear in these pages soon. Look out for "The Ever-Dreaming Verdict of Plagues", which will be illustrated by Jim Burns.



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IMPATIBLE

BY WILL MCINTOSH

The Methodist Church was selling pumpkins. There were thousands of them – thousands of setting suns spilling across the straw-covered grass, stacked in rolling piles, and propped on makeshift plywood displays. This was a power place. Leia would be safe here.

She got out of the car and waded in among the pumpkins, absorbing the goodness, the realness of them, letting fond memories of Halloween's past wash over her.

The dots shrunk and receded. The squeeze of anxiety receded with them, the sweat on Leia's palms drying in the crisp fall air. The respite was sweet; she drank it in, inhaled deeply and easily, picking up a hint of burning leaves. The scent of burning leaves was good, too. It was not as powerful an ally as the pumpkins, but Leia appreciated all of her allies.

She checked her Scooby Doo watch: it was two fifteen. The sale would be open for at least another three or four hours. The trick would be to spend all day among the pumpkins without appearing to be a total nutcase to the two women running the sale. Leia returned to her car and pulled a camera out of the back seat.

She began snapping photos of the pumpkins, moving about as if she knew what she was doing. It felt good to be out. Once it got cold and she had to close the drive-in for the season she could go days without seeing a single soul.

Even at the drive-in, the dots could ambush Leia if she wandered to just the wrong spot, like the drainage ditch that ran along the woods, or the little room around the back side of the snack bar that stored the cleaning supplies. The dots were black – blacker than the background on which they hunched, or floated, or whatever it was that they did. It didn't help Leia to think about them, didn't help to face her fear. She'd always heard that you should face your fears, but this fear only got worse when you faced it.

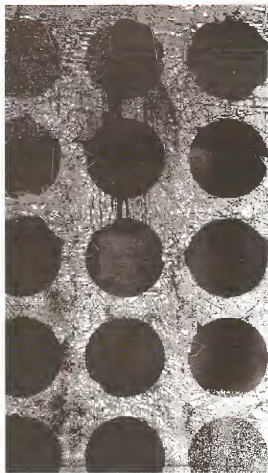
A guy in a red wool cap was looking at her. He was trying not to be obvious, looking away whenever her gaze drifted in his direction, trying to look without being a creep. If he did it too much longer, though, Leia would still think he was a creep.

She rolled a big squat pumpkin into her lap, focused to get some close-ups, enjoying the cool weight of it pressing her thighs.

The guy had stopped looking at her. He was sorting through a barrel of little pumpkins, rotating them in his palm as if choosing produce in a grocery store. He had shoulder length hair and round Lennon glasses, a lupine face that was odd but not unpleasant. Not that it mattered what he looked like, given Leia's issues. Given the dots.

Her earliest memory is of the dots. She's in bed, her mother leaning over her, tucking her in as she says her prayers. Mommy wants her to say a special prayer for auntie Julia, who has gone to the stars. When Leia closes her eyes and thinks of the stars, instead of seeing bright flickering lights she sees black dots. They're humming and bobbing,

Will McIntosh is a Hugo award winner and Nebula finalist whose short stories have appeared in such venues as *Asimov's* (where he won the 2010 Reader's Award for short story), *Strange Horizons*, and *Science Fiction and Fantasy: Best of the Year*. This is his seventh appearance in *Interzone*. His first novel, *Soft Apocalypse*, was released in April by Night Shade Books. It is based on his 2005 *Interzone* short story of the same name, which was nominated for both the British Science Fiction Association and the British Fantasy Society awards. His second novel, *Deadland*, will be published by Night Shade Books in 2012. Will is a psychology professor at Georgia Southern University in the USA. In 2008 he became the father of twins.



and they scare her so badly that her breath freezes in her chest. They are so bad. Leia senses this from the first moment. So bad.

The guy was staring off into the distance now, exhaling cold smoke. Leia surreptitiously snapped a picture of him, then turned away.

It was getting cold. She pulled gloves out of her coat pockets while scanning for good photos. An infant in a lime green windbreaker pointed at a pumpkin by her feet, then looked up at her mother, who said something in an encouraging tone that was drowned out by a passing truck. Leia snapped some photos of them from a respectful distance. It felt so good. If only the girl had a little red wagon to pull her pumpkins in. That would have shrunk the dots to specks.

The mother and daughter picked out a pumpkin and left, but the guy stayed. Leia was pretty sure he was staying because of her. He was pointedly not looking at Leia now, keeping his back to her as much as possible, strolling among the pumpkins, his hands bunched in jeans pocket. His jaw was tense from the cold, his pointy nose pink. She kept expecting him either to leave or hit on her. It was awkward, both of them taking such an inappropriately long time to choose a pumpkin.

Leia lifted a medium-sized pumpkin by its stalk and took it up to the women sitting in lawn chairs behind a rickety card table. She was hungry anyway; she'd grab something to eat and then come back. She handed one of the women a ten; the other opened the green cash tray to get her change.

"I hope you don't mind me spending so much time here." She lifted her camera. "I freelance for magazines," she lied.

"Oh, no, that's wonderful," one of the women said. They were both overweight, with wonderfully motherish clothes and hairstyles.

"Would it be okay if I came back in a while, to catch them in a different light?" Leia asked.

The woman waved away the question. "Stay as long as you like, we enjoy watching you," Leia thanked them and took her pumpkin to the car.

Her heart began to thump as soon as she pulled away, as soon as happy orange spheres were replaced by strip malls, telephone poles, cyclone fencing. Bad things, things that nourished the dots. The dots were stirring.

She headed toward Boyd's Drug Store, which had a bit of power. She'd have a tuna salad sandwich and a cup of tea, then return to the pumpkins.

Icy blasts of anxiety hit her, one on top of the next. She tried imagining she was in a place with incredible power – a museum of power places, where every turn revealed something wonderful, a shiny new Good Humor ice cream truck, or a cozy comic book store filled with vintage *Richie Rich* and *Hot Stuff*. Sometimes it helped a little, to imagine power places, but not today.

The dots pulsed, their baritone thrumming registering at the roots of Leia's molars and deep in her belly. To Leia it was the sound of fear, cold and metallic and mindless. She covered them with phantom hands, struggled to suppress them, felt them slip away as if they were greased. There were two of them. Sometimes there were three or four. Once there had been eight. She'd been in English class in middle school on the Day of Eight, as she'd come to think of it. She'd wet her pants when she sensed them all there (wherever 'there' was), crammed into

her mind's eye. Urine had dribbled off her chair and onto the Formica floor, and she'd scurried to the nurse's office clutching a notebook over the front of her pants.

Were the dots even aware of her? Did they have awareness at all, or were they just natural phenomena of some sort? Leia didn't know. She pulled into the drug store parking lot.

It was closed. It was Sunday. Of course. Leia took a deep breath, tried to quell rising panic. Where else could she eat?

It was too late – the dots were bulging, losing their two-dimensional flatness, glistening, sweating fluid as black as deep starless space. Leia hurried back to the pumpkin sale. She wasn't hungry any more.

She'd never let them grow big enough to find out what would happen. All she knew was that it would be bad. It was not a fear to be faced. Not this one. Oh, no.

Not even her parents had understood. They'd been sympathetic, they'd indulged her, but they'd never understood. It was their one and only failing as parents, as far as Leia was concerned, that they did not understand that the dots were not just in her head. They were in her head, but they weren't only in her head.

The guy in the red cap was still there, half-sitting on a wooden rack, his hands braced behind him, a pumpkin beside him. He glanced at Leia, who was squeezing the steering wheel, which was covered in a pink fuzzy steering wheel mitten. He looked away.

This was too much. It was just too strange to continue hanging around in such close proximity to someone without acknowledging him, and Leia wasn't going to let him drive her away. Twenty minutes with the pumpkins would shrink the dots enough that she could make it home if she wanted to, but she didn't want to go back to her little apartment over the silent drive-in. She loved her apartment – it was her ultimate power place, but you can get tired of any place if you spend too much time there.

Leia grabbed her camera and drifted around, hugging herself in the growing cold, circuitously navigating toward the guy who was at the moment the only other customer. She stopped a few feet from him, leaned over a clump of misshapen pumpkins and took a few bird's-eye shots.

She glanced his way, as if she'd just realized she was in his vicinity. "You must love pumpkins as much as I do," she said.

He looked at her. Leia thought he was going to look over his shoulder to make sure she wasn't talking to someone else, but he didn't. Instead, he smiled and nodded.

"I love their color," he said. "They're perfectly orange, an orange only pumpkins can be. No orange dye number two added."

"They fire off so many good memories," Leia said.

"Mmm." He lifted the one sitting next to him, held it in his lap. "And I love the shapes. They all approximate round, but none ever quite get there." He swept his long bangs out of his eyes; they fell right back into place, obscuring his eyes. "I bet if you averaged them all together though, the resulting pumpkin would be perfectly round. I think that's how nature works: the perfection is always in the entirety, never in the individual."

Leia nodded, not sure how to respond to such an abstract observation.

"I'm Byron, by the way." He held out his hand. Leia shook it.

She liked shaking hands with gloves on – there was contact, but with a buffer. Risk and safety rolled together.

There was a pause, a moment when they could either continue talking, continue the dance, or declare the short conversation a success and drift apart, becoming strangers again. Leia was torn – she craved talk with someone new, though this guy said odd, slightly unnerving things. On the other hand she was finding that talking to Byron left a crackle of energy in the cold air; it gave her flashes of lying in freshly fallen snow, in that moment just before the first flap of her arms and legs formed a snow angel. But it could not become a date thing, or even a friend thing. She couldn't hide the dots, and she was finished with trying to tell people about them and sound sane at the same time. It wasn't possible.

"Well, good luck in your search," Leia said. Safer just to say goodbye, she decided.

"Oh," Byron said, looking surprised, maybe that Leia was ending their conversation so soon. "You, too."

Leia wandered off, feigning interest in a particular pumpkin close to the road. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Byron run his gloved hand over his face, glance toward Leia, then off toward the rough white stone wall of the church. There was an earnestness about him; an appealing familiarity to his mannerisms despite his oddness. She knew she'd never met him before, but he was one of those people who fit easily into a type, who reminded her of a number of other people, though she couldn't describe what they all had in common. There was comfort in people like that.

Leia's last boyfriend had been Joseph. He hadn't easily fit into a type. He'd eventually tired of canned Beefaroni and watching the same three dozen movies on VHS, but it was the dots that sealed the deal. He'd initiated an argument as a way to escape with honor soon after she told him why she couldn't go with him to his office's New Year's Eve party. If it had been a Halloween party, or even Christmas, there might have been enough allies to ward off the dots. She could have dressed as Edward Scissorhands if it were Halloween. If it were Christmas she could have spent the night in the shadow of the tree, watching the flick of the colored lights reflect off strands of tinsel while drinking spiked eggnog. But New Year's held no allies for her.

Leia let their orbits cross again. "So what do you do, Byron?"

"I'm an artist. A designer. Landscape architect," he said.

"All three?" Leia asked, amused at how his answer was broken in pieces.

Byron shrugged. "They're all one thing. How about you?"

"I own a drive-in, out on Route 301."

"Interesting. I've never met anyone who owns a drive-in before." Byron cupped his hands and blew into them.

"So why did you decide to become a landscape artist?"

"I noticed that there were fewer and fewer places for people to care about in the world. I wanted to push against that tide."

"That's a great phrase," Leia said. "Places for people to care about. I've never thought about it in those terms."

"But you know what I mean?" A cold mist puffed from Byron's mouth as he spoke. "It's all becoming parking lots and corrugated metal siding. Median strips. Cut up squares of lawn. It deadens your soul."

"There's no 'there' there," Leia said.

Byron grasped her forearm as if she'd said something terribly profound. "Exactly!" His hand lingered a moment longer than it should have, and Leia let it. The contact, muffled by his glove, felt good.

"We don't all care about the same places, though," Leia said, thinking of her power places.

"That's true. But we all agree on the places that are not worth caring about."

"We do. Yes."

"They're killing us," he said.

"They're killing me, that's for sure," Leia said. She took a step backward, toward her Beetle. "I'd better get going. It was nice talking to you."

He smiled, but looked disappointed. "You, too."

Leia decided she would watch *Superman* when she got home. The Christopher Reeve version, of course. *Lois, was it really worth risking your life for ten dollars, two credit cards, and a lipstick?*

"Leia?"

She turned.

Byron took a few steps to catch up with her. "I've really enjoyed talking to you," he said. He licked his lips; they were chapped from the cold. "Would you mind if I called you some time to talk some more?"

It was clear that he'd rehearsed it in his head a few times before saying it. Byron swallowed, looking like a sixteen-year-old nerd who'd just asked out a cheerleader and knew he was about to be rejected with extreme malice. And nothing could have melted Leia more.

"Sure," she said, brushing her hair back over her ear. "Do you have a pen?"

Byron called the next day. No two-day delay for the sake of cool, just a guy on the other end of the phone who was so nervous that he started the conversation out of breath.

"It's Byron? From the pumpkin patch?" Assuming she'd already forgotten him, or got so many calls that she needed prompts to keep her suitors straight. Shut-ins who had to leapfrog from power place to power place or risk being consumed by dots that no one else could see did not field many calls from suitors.

Leia lay in her bed facing the wall that held her cereal box collection and talked to a near-stranger. It wasn't a brief call to ask her on a date – he'd meant what he said about wanting to talk. He asked what her favorite things were, and what she kept on her dresser. He said he loved the sound a stream made when it tripped over stones, and the wet chuckle horses made with their loose lips. He wished dogs could fly, because he couldn't imagine anything quite as fabulous as the sight of a brown Labrador skimming the treetops, that look of windblown ecstasy on his face.

"You have a vintage laugh," Leia told him.

"There are vintage laughs?"

"Listen to people laughing in old movies. They have different sorts of laughs than people do today. Laughs go in and out of fashion, same as hats. We just don't notice." She didn't add that vintage laughs held a hint of power.

Just before they were to hang up, Byron asked her to dinner at Cha Bella, one of those restaurants where they serve salmon

drizzled with a perfect pentagram of amaretto reduction on a huge expanse of white plate. A place where everything is clean lines and jazz piano, where Leia had no allies.

She suggested the snack bar in the bowling alley instead. Byron balked. Of course he did. Who besides Leia wanted to eat at the bowling alley snack bar? And now Byron probably sensed that Leia was not without her weak points. She was cute in a fatigued, adrenal exhaustion way, her honey hair split and frizzed yet still long and full, but she was the pinnacle of high maintenance. Leia regretted giving Byron her number. She just wanted to get off the phone. Then he suggested they have a picnic at the pumpkin sale. Perfect.

With permission from the ladies behind the card table they made a circle of pumpkins and spread a red and white checked picnic blanket in the center. Leia mostly ate the food she'd brought: peanut butter and marshmallow Fluff oozing between slices of white Wonder bread, sliced apples mixed with walnuts and raisins. She noticed that Byron mostly ate what he'd brought: gorgeous sushi rolls, each a symmetrical work of art, an edible mandala, and raw carrots and celery in alternating rows, offset by a half-sphere of hummus.

"So what does your work look like?" Leia asked.

He leaned back on his palms, shrugged. "Different. For me it's all about how a landscape feels, the emotions I feel."

"You'll have to email me some photos so I can see it."

"I've got a better idea," he said. "Let me show you my house. I've been working on the landscaping for ten years."

"I'd like to, but, some other time," Leia said.

"Are you sure? Couldn't we go for just a while? Look..." He held out his hands, palms up, as if to show he wasn't armed. "I'm not the sort of person who'd make a pass or anything. I'd just like to show you what I've done with my house."

If only that was her greatest fear right now, that this perfectly guileless man might try to kiss her. "I know that, Byron. It's not you, honest." She started packing up. She felt like such an idiot. She was blowing it. "I'd better get going."

"Maybe we can meet again tomorrow?" Byron asked.

"I'd like that," she said. "Could we meet here again?"

It was apparent that the women at the pumpkin sale were busting with curiosity, but they didn't ask why Leia and Byron kept returning. This time they met for drinks and dessert. Byron unveiled a polished steel tumbler of hot rum cider and produced two crystal goblets from his coat pockets. Leia produced a celery-green Tupperware container. She opened the lid with a "ta-da!" and a flourish.

She'd made oatmeal raisin cookies. The cookies were perfect circles, the raisins evenly spaced. Byron covered his heart with his palms. "They're gorgeous. I love them."

"You haven't eaten one yet," Leia said. "They're pretty, but they taste like dung."

Byron smiled, poured cider. Steam wafted from the goblet; she caught a whiff of nutmeg. Out of habit she checked the status of the dots. They were hard black frozen peas.

Byron took a cookie and put the whole thing in his mouth at once. That made sense: if he bit the cookie, it would no longer be round.

It was obvious Byron had more than a touch of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Leia didn't mind. She found it endearing, the way his fingernails were perfectly manicured half-moons, and the top button on his red and green plaid shirt was buttoned.

Leia sipped the cider, scooted closer to Byron under the artifice of being in easier reach of the cookies. A couple wandered by, the woman carrying a sleeping child. They nodded hello and continued walking. "What a romantic idea," she heard the woman say. She felt like a normal girl starting a romance with a normal, wonderfully awkward man whose head was filled with crazy, fascinating, poetic ideas.

"You're a cider demigod," Leia said, hoisting her glass and holding it aloft for a toast.

Byron lifted his glass, clinked it to hers. "If you were Native American, your name would be Bakes Perfectly Round Cookies."

They drank. There was a pause then, the sort of pause that was the perfect moment for a first kiss. She considered leaning in, to signal Byron that a kiss would not be unappreciated. Before she could decide whether that was a good idea, given the dots, Byron kissed her of his own accord.

One of the women behind the card table giggled delightedly, then stifled it abruptly.

"You don't want to get too involved with me," Leia said, their faces still close. "Trust me on that one."

Byron frowned. "Why not? Are you married or something?"

Leia shook her head. "No. I just have a lot of issues. I'm one of those extremely neurotic chicks your mom warned you to stay away from."

Byron swept at his bangs. "Well, since we're being honest, you can't hold a candle to me when it comes to issues. No one holds a candle to me." He reached for her hand; Leia splayed her fingers.

It was getting dark. The longleaf pines were black against a silver-grey sky. The smell of pine and the sharp, cold air reminded Leia of Christmas. The combination had power.

"I have an idea," Byron said. "Let's both take a chance – a chance to get closer. Tell me your biggest issue – the worst thing about you. I promise I won't judge you. No matter what it is." He swept his free hand, banishing all doubt. "I promise to like you just as much. Then I'll tell you mine."

Leia smiled wanly, shook her head. "Don't want to."

"Come on, please?"

Leia just kept shaking her head. Byron reached out a tentative hand, brushed her hair back. "Trust me. There's nothing you can say that would make me not like you."

Leia squinted at him. He had no idea, the things she could tell him. It felt like a challenge, like a knight of the round table handing her a sword and saying "go ahead, give me your best shot, I'll bet you can't knock me off this stump." In this particular challenge Leia's best shot was a two hundred pound war hammer that could not only knock him off the stump, but send him sailing far over the castle wall.

Leia disintegrated her hand from his. "All right, I'll play. I give you my best shot, and you see if you can handle it."

Byron nodded. "I can handle it."

Leia smirked. Poor little sucker.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. "Imagine the most

terrifying thing you can. The thing that crawls in the corner of your worst nightmares, that leaves children screaming in the night because their too-open minds haven't learned to block it out yet, and they can't even describe it to their parents sitting at the edge of the bed, because there are no words for it, it just is."

Byron's expression was strange. It wasn't a patronizing look, or an 'and your point is?' look. Byron looked...alarmed. It wasn't the sort of look Leia was used to seeing at this point, although it also wasn't particularly promising. She pushed on, the hope she had allowed to creep in now all but dashed.

"Then imagine this thing doesn't go away as you grow up. In fact, it gets worse. It's always with you, always fighting to rise to the surface. And imagine you never get less terrified of it; you're certain that if you let it grow big enough, it will do something horrible, but you don't know what."

Byron's entire face was trembling. The skin around his eyes was twitching so badly Leia was afraid he was having a seizure.

"Are they black circles?" he asked.

Leia's mouth fell open.

"I want to imagine it," Byron said. "I live it. Every single day of my life."

"What are your power places?" Leia asked, eyeing her display of family photos, pinned haphazardly by the thousands, covering most of an entire wall.

"Places that are simple and beautiful, clean, harmonious. Gardens, but not wilderness. Wilderness is too wild. I hate beige, hate clutter, can't abide walls made of concrete blocks, or that corrugated aluminum siding. What about you?"

"Drive-ins, white ice cream trucks that play circus music, *Frankenstein* – the original one with Boris Karloff. Skee-ball. Greeting card stores, and the greeting card departments of drug stores. *King of the Road*, black and white tiled floors. Snowmen with button eyes and carrot noses. Cereal boxes. Primary colors."

"What's *King of the Road*?" Byron asked.

"An old song. Really old. My father used to play it when I was little, and it was old then."

"Does there have to be cereal in the cereal boxes?"

"No."

"What do those things have in common?" Byron asked.

"They all give me the feeling I get sitting in front of a fire sipping cocoa. The dots can't stand the warmth."

"It goes back to what we learned to love in childhood," Byron said.

"When the dots first formed. Yeah."

They racked their brains for power places that overlapped. Most were transient. Pumpkin sales. County fairs, but different parts of them. The problem was, most natural places were deadly bad for Leia. Gardens were cold, bleak, awful places. Byron couldn't watch movies or TV. His dots loved them.

They couldn't even agree on a restaurant. Byron could only eat where the orange sauce was drizzled over the salmon with the esthetic of a Pollock painting, with a side of slaw white as starlight, curled into springs set on ponds of romaine.

Leia did best eating in places that shouldn't serve food. Convenience store hot dogs rotating on wire racks washed down with Slurpees. Chicken and dumplings ladled into question-

able cups at the county fair. Foil-wrapped barbecue sandwiches that materialized out of nowhere, passed across a worn Formica counter at the dusty auction barn out on Highway 24. How often could they possibly need to replenish those cans of tuna stacked on that dusty shelf, or the mayonnaise sitting inside that barely breathing refrigerator?

"What was your diagnosis?" Leia asked.

"Obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. You?"

"Delusional parasitosis."

"You're kidding, right? There's a specific name for people who have imaginary parasites?"

Leia's memory flashed – sitting on a stuffed chair in a marble-floored psychiatrist's office, talking about the dots. She blocked it with practiced ease. Neither Paxil nor Xanax had been allies. "Look it up. Your psychiatrist didn't do his homework."

"Do you ever wonder if that's all they are? Delusions brought on by mental illness?" Byron asked.

"Every day. They feel real, but that doesn't mean they are."

"I wish there was some way to know for sure. I'd like to know I'm not crazy."

"I'm not sure which would be worse, discovering that I'm crazy, or knowing for certain that they're real."

"What do you think they really are?" Byron asked.

"I don't like to think about it. It scares me. All of the possibilities are terrible."

"When I was younger, I used to think they were dead people. Then I had a period when I was sure they were psychological. Repressed memories maybe. Then I went the science fiction route. Beings from another dimension. Portals to another dimension. A horrible dimension, one that would drive you insane if you ever glimpsed it head-on. We're only glimpsing shadows."

"Byron, stop!" Leia got off her bed, moved a bunch of *Star Wars* action figures onto the bed one handful at a time. "They just are. They don't have to make sense to us. They're no more unlikely than we are." She got back on the bed, surrounded by power totems to banish her dread.

"I'm sorry," Byron said. "I didn't say it to scare you. I just think we have a better chance of beating this if we can understand what we're fighting. Since I found out about you I've been feeling more hopeful. Maybe the two of us can find a way to beat them."

"It's nice to have an ally," Leia said. He was right. Leia knew he was right, but she hated thinking about the dots. "Okay. Let's make a list of possibilities. Everything we can think of, no matter how stupid."

"Number one: they're dead people," Byron said.

"When I was little I was sure they were the devil, and that if they got too strong he would take me to hell."

"Number two: Satan," Byron said.

Between them they came up with some fascinating ideas, including:

Leia and Byron were AI programs on a starship. The world was a delusion to keep them from going insane. The dots were them sensing the real world. They called this the Matrix theory.

The dots were implanted by aliens who had abducted them when they were children.

The dots were cancer. Their awareness of it was a rare, undocumented ability.

They were serving as wombs for the dots – keeping them safe, gestating them. When Leia and Byron felt unsafe and agitated, the dots were in danger of birthing prematurely.

None of the theories seemed likely.

The pumpkins were gone. It was October 31 – they should have kept them out one more day at least. Leia kept her car running for the heat, surveyed the barren straw, the planks of wood stacked by the church's driveway, ready to be hauled away. The dots started to complain.

In the rear view mirror, she saw Byron approach, the whirl of his scooter rising. Disappointment bordering on despair registered on his face. She got out.

"Now what?" Leia said.

Byron wrapped his arms around her, kissed her. "I don't know. Maybe we can meet a few times a day, just for a few minutes each time?"

Leia looked at their feet, their toes inches apart. "We have so much in common, but we're incompatible in the most fundamental way."

"We could get married," Byron said.

"What?" Leia said.

Byron smiled, though it was a distressed smile. His dots were rising. Leia's heart was hammering too.

"Where could we get married?" she asked.

"At a pumpkin sale next October."

"Then what? We can't live at a pumpkin sale. As soon as the pumpkins started to rot, the dots would be on us. We can't afford to fly in fresh pumpkins year-round."

"So we live apart most of the time. So what? I'd rather see you a few minutes a day and talk to you on the phone than not have you at all."

"I don't think I can do it. It hurts too much." She started to cry. The dots took advantage, swelling obscenely.

"Please don't," Byron said.

"I have to. We have to. You know we do."

Through Leia's bedroom window, the drive-in stretched out, a field of grey gravel surrounded on three sides by trees, a big white screen at the far end, leaning, looking eager to feel the color of a new release.

Leia sat staring, stroking a pumpkin in her lap, the one she'd bought the first day she met Byron. Everything made her think of Byron, even things that had nothing to do with him. Packets of sugar made her think of Byron.

Her drive-in still had old-fashioned speakers set on poles, even though almost none of the customers used them any more. Byron would use them, if he took her to a drive-in. If he could.

She put the pumpkin on her dresser (Byron had asked what she kept on her dresser), grabbed her keys and headed out. She needed to feel really cold air, the kind you only felt when you drove fast with the windows open in November.

She headed out on Route 301, away from town. She drove fast.

The dots woke. She'd never hated the dots more. She turned her hate on them like a blowtorch, imagined their edges curling before they burst into flame. Somewhere, she'd read that anger

was more powerful than fear. Maybe she could hate the dots to death.

They hummed cold electric threats that tore through her anger like knives through paper, exposing the solid core of fear underneath. She kept driving.

She drove as long as she could, until it was too much and she had to turn back. Instead of going home, she headed to the bowling alley, for a burger and fries on a white paper plate with ruffled edges, the comforting sound of bowling balls crashing into heavy wood pins in the background.

The familiar crunch of gravel under her tires welcomed her home to the drive-in. Fear receded, but the sadness sat in her chest like a block of concrete.

Byron's scooter was leaned up against one of the speaker poles.

Leia threw the car into park, leaped out, thrilled to see the scooter, even if seeing him would only reopen a wound that would have to start healing all over again. "Byron?" Unless he'd just arrived, he wouldn't have much time.

He was in the kiddie park, lying curled in a snow drift beside the teeter-totter. Leaning up against one leg of the swing set was a little chalk board. On it, Byron had written *I'll beat them, or die trying. I love you.*

He was shaking all over, his eyes distant, his hands clenched in fists. Leia held his head and called his name, but he didn't respond. She gripped him by the shoulders and dragged him toward the door.

Halfway there, she stopped. How could she let him suffer the fury of hell while she sat sipping cocoa in her power place? What he was doing was so brave. No one but her could understand just how brave. If he succeeded, if he beat the dots without dying, or losing his sanity, they would still be confined by Leia's dots. It wasn't fair to Byron.

"I love you too, Byron," she said. She pulled him toward her car. They would face their demons together.

She drove to the state park, went a mile or so down a dirt access road and pulled over. The dots were already swelling, already humming.

She spread a pile of blankets beside the road and dragged Byron out of the back seat. He was locked in a tight ball, whimpering. She arranged him in the blankets, then turned and threw the keys into the woods and lay down next to him, wishing she'd gone to the bathroom before leaving the drive-in. Her worst nightmare was coming true. She would likely die, or go insane, or be swept into some horrible black dimension where she would be trapped for eternity. But maybe Byron would be there with her. At least she would finally know what happened when the dots grew. She was so tired of running from it.

The dots were already holding court. They were sickly swollen and vibrating. The sound resembled atonal, droning, miserable music that repeated in a tight loop. With each throb, the dots moved closer to the lens of her minds' eye, and the sound got louder. Amidst the droning, Leia made out voices. What were they saying? It sounded like 'count to ten', or maybe 'cut the tape'.

No – it was shifting, saying one thing over and over, then morphing into some other, similar phrase. Now it was 'come to them'.

They were so close; she wanted to move away from them, but

didn't know how. She felt nauseous. She wanted to go home.

For the first time Leia saw them close up – black pools too close to be seen as complete circles. She cried in fear as they loomed closer. She thought she could make out faces on them, rudimentary slits for mouths and angry angled slashes for eyes, like demons in a child's nightmare. Was this about hell and demons after all? The demon faces twitched, and Leia recoiled, almost certain now that she was possessed, and on her way to hell.

"Trailers for sale or rent..." A voice cut through the horror show in her mind. It was Byron, singing in a weak mumble.

"Pushing broom for fifty cents..." He'd butchered the line, but still, Leia lapped it up like water in the desert. "I'm a man who's mean by no means... King of the Road."

He was trying to save her, Leia realized. A lifeline, tossed by a drowning man.

"No. Stop it," she said. We live or die together, she wanted to add, but didn't have the strength. Byron stopped.

Leia could feel the warmth of his hip pressed against hers. She wanted to reach over and touch him, brush his hair, but she felt like she was falling into a black pit, like she was having the worst drunken bed spins anyone had ever had. She struggled to open her eyes, tried to focus on Byron, on the buttons of his winter coat, to stop the spins. The sunlight hurt – it leapt straight to the backs of her eyes. Even squinting, rays of light stabbed like lightning bolts. With a terrible effort she raised her hand and shielded her eyes from the light.

"Oh god. I can see your dots." One was bulging from his ear, like a fat, round slug. Another was squeezing out of the corner of his eye, inflating as it pulled clear.

Byron managed to peel open one eye. A weak cry of terror fluttered from his chapped lips. They were pulsing in time with Byron's heart.

Leia closed her eyes. The faces on her dots had vanished. She wondered if they'd really been there before, or if she'd only imagined them. And what did it mean to imagine something on something else that you might be imagining? She was insane, wasn't she? Of course she was. In the muddle of terror and noise and the staccato flashing of the dots, a tiny oasis of clarity nodded sagely. This was full-blown schizophrenia. It was manifesting after years of warning – a classic case, replete with paranoia and visual and auditory hallucinations.

Byron jerked, grunting in fear. Leia opened her eyes.

One of them had squeezed free of his eye. It rolled/crawled across his cheek, still expanding, and plopped onto the ground beside him. It moved off into the brush, now a glistening, ink-black beach ball. The thrumming was deafening; it shook the branches of the trees. Byron's mouth was cranked open wide, but Leia couldn't hear his screams. Four dots were pushing out of him. And those were only the ones she could see.

A second broke free.

The first was now huge, the top lost in the treetops. Its edges were blurred, as if it were vibrating.

It popped.

Her head was in Byron's lap. He was stroking her hair. "Hang on, it's almost over," he said.

Leia pried an eye open. A dot was bulging obscenely from

her ear. She moaned.

"Hang on just a little longer," Byron said. His voice was hoarse, but stronger. "We had it all wrong. All this time."

Leia thought her nose was growing. It was another dot, squeezing out through her nostril. The pain was excruciating.

"Take deep breaths, Leia. It'll be all over soon."

"Sing the song," she said. "Please. This is intolerable."

"Leia, listen." He shook her gently. "Those aren't our power places, they're *their* power places." He had to raise his voice now – the dot was getting louder. "Every time we left those places, the dots drove us back to them, because they can't survive away from them."

The dot popped free of Leia's ear. She recoiled in horror as it rolled across the blanket. It dropped into the grass, expanding by the second.

"See?" Byron shouted over the thrumming, pointing at it. "It's trying to get to a power place. But it's too late."

The dot grew and grew, and then it popped. For one awful second, Leia was doused in a spray of electric terror. Then it was just gone.

She felt one crawling down through her nasal passage, into her throat. She breathed through her nose as best she could as it expanded in her mouth. It felt slick against her tongue, bulged like a black bubblegum bubble from her mouth, and finally popped free.

One by one, they crawled out of her.

And popped.

Until there weren't any more.

It was quiet, except for the wind in the leaves and the papery flap of a hawk taking flight.

"We're free," Byron said. His face was pressed into her hair, his breath tickling her ear.

Free. She watched the hawk rise over the treetops.

"Give me your keys," Byron said, rubbing her shoulder, "I'll take you home."

"I threw them in the woods."

"You threw them in the woods." He chuckled. "Okay. What's the plan?"

"I guess we walk." Walk. They could walk. Free. "But not yet. Let's rest for a while."

It had been so long since she'd been in the woods. Besides the little road, there was nothing in sight that was not alive and growing. It had a different sort of power – energizing rather than calming. She soaked it in.

"I have a new theory," Byron said.

Leia rolled on top of him. "Tell me."

"They were parasites. Rare ones, that haven't been identified yet. They took up residence in our brains when we were kids, and fed off the feelings we got when we were in our power places. When you think certain thoughts, you stimulate certain locations in the brain. More blood flows there, and there are more chemical transactions."

Leia considered. "I'll buy that." She laughed. "We can rule out hell and dead people anyway."

"For a while there I was sure one of them was my dead mother," Byron said.

"It was so awful. So awful," Leia said. She shuddered.

Byron lifted his head and kissed her. "It's over now." ♦

BOOK ZONE

SON OF HEAVEN

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SON OF HEAVEN

David Wingrove

Corvus, 384pp, £18.99 hb

Review and Interview by Ian Sales

In 1989, *The Middle Kingdom*, the first volume of David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo* series, was published. Across eight volumes, the series told of a Chinese-dominated future over several centuries. The final book, *The Marriage of the Living Dark*, appeared in 1997. After a shaky start, the books were well-regarded – in *Interzone* #33 (Jan/Feb 1990), Paul J. McAuley described *The Middle Kingdom* as “a rather run-of-the-mill beginning to a future-history epic”, but by the final volume, Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* #124 (October 1997) declared, “I write to celebrate ... deserves not only the many PhDs it will spawn, but the attentive reading of the few ... who have the time and the will to appreciate it”.

That was *Chung Kuo* Version 1.0. Now we have *Chung Kuo* Version 2.0. In February 2011, Corvus published *Son of Heaven*, the first in an expanded and rewritten edition of the series. Instead of eight volumes, there are now twenty. Science fiction is littered with series of books in double-figures, few of which seem to have been planned to use so many words. *Chung Kuo* has the advantage of a fixed vision over all twenty volumes, and for this new version that is doubly true. *Son of Heaven* is not *The Middle Kingdom* revised, but entirely new material and a prequel of sorts. It shows the old world, the world of our foreseeable future, destroyed,

and the start of a new world order imposed by the Chinese.

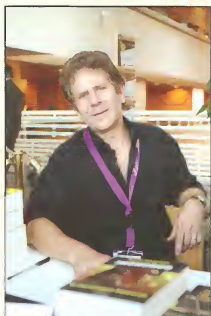
Son of Heaven opens in 2065, twenty years after the fall of Western civilisation. Jake Reed and his son live a bucolic life in the Dorset village of Corfe. This life is threatened when refugees fleeing some mysterious event in the Midlands begin to appear. On a trip to the nearby market town of Dorchester, yet more clues appear to some strange impending doom.

The book then flips back in time to 2043. Jake Reed is a successful “data-dancer”. He works for a powerful corporation, playing the market in virtual reality, called the “datscape”. But the market is under attack by persons unknown. As the economies of the Western nations begin to crumble, so too do their societies. Jake finds himself the target of a team of assassins, but manages to successfully evade them. Alone, his friends and colleagues dead, the cities in flames, he heads south, hoping to find safety in the countryside.

The final third returns to 2065. The enemy now shows itself: a Chinese general, Jiang Lei, leading an army set to conquer the UK – or what remains of it – and build the foundations of the great city of many levels which, it is implied, already covers much of Asia. Jake and Jiang are kindred spirits and though Jake is on a “wanted” list, Jiang fixes it so that he is assimilated under a false identity. Meanwhile, China continues to subsume the nations of the West.

Son of Heaven lays out a near-future world, only to raze it. It then replaces it with a very British post-apocalyptic rural fantasy, only to trample upon that. It is a very readable novel, and its 384 pages pass surprisingly quickly. Perhaps it often feels a little old-fashioned, and its middle third reads like a belated jump on the cyberpunk bandwagon. But, for a twenty-volume series, *Son of Heaven* is a surprisingly involving opening novel. Wingrove has humanised his epic and that, I think, is perhaps *Son of Heaven*'s chief achievement.

Corvus are treating the publication of this new twenty-volume *Chung Kuo* as an ‘event’, and it’s certainly true that in science fiction series planned at this length are rare. In fantasy, series of epic length have proven very popular during the past twenty years, which suggests the time may be upon us for the same to be true for science fiction. If any series will prove this, it will be *Chung Kuo*. *Son of Heaven* can only be read as the start of a series. It is also a very readable start, and promises much for the volumes to come.



What inspired you to expand and rework *Chung Kuo*?

I guess the simple answer is a sense of sheer dissatisfaction with how the sequence had ended. Fans complained, and they were quite right to. Oh, I had mitigating circumstances – I'd been forced to squeeze the two novels I had planned to write into one single overcrowded tome – but I'd not given the whole thing the powerhouse ending it deserved. There were lots of ideas there in that final volume, *The Marriage of the Living Dark*, but no artistic coherence, and, in going back to the sequence – and in particular to the end of it – I wanted to put that right. And much, much more. Whereas the bulk of the series – Books Three to Sixteen – will reappear in a heavily re-edited and fine-polished form, the final four books in the revamped sequence will, in effect, be brand new material.

Anyway, it was as I was contemplating doing all this – and whilst I was working hard to get the publishing rights back worldwide – that I conceived the idea of writing a prequel, which explained how the world of *Chung Kuo* came about. That was originally going to be called *When China Comes*. Five years and fourteen drafts later – including three intensive edits with the amazing Caroline Oakley – we arrived at where we are now, with the two prequels, *Son of Heaven* and (due this Autumn) *Daylight on Iron Mountain*, each of which draws the reader slowly into the great world of levels that is *Chung Kuo*.

Did anything in the real world during the past twenty years change *Chung Kuo*? Is

Chinese global dominance more or less likely than it was twenty years ago?

Well, the possibility of China running a future world went from being crazy and crankily unlikely – the kind of thing only a demented visionary might imagine – to being something the USA and others have set up think-tanks to explore. In those twenty years China went from Number 43 in the GDP ratings to Number 2. Give them ten more years with a growth rate of 10% per annum and they'll be Number 1.

Here's a few questions you might ask. Who has the biggest space programme on the planet? Which nation's citizens are currently buying lots of expensive property in London? Which nation will, in the next five years, have a middle class of 400 million, all wanting the luxuries of life? Who currently are building the biggest city on the planet – with an urban sprawl the size of Wales and holding 43 million people? Which nation last year managed to get half a million people a day through the gates of its EXPO in Shanghai? And, having asked these questions, you might ask, what are China's long-term aims? What kind of contract are they going to forge with the West? And then you might ask, is *Chung Kuo* even vaguely a possibility? That's what's changed. That it has become so, even as a thought exercise. Only in those twenty three years since the original sequence was first published I've not had to change *Chung Kuo* one jot. I didn't plan it that way, but it's turned out to be one of those rare instances of the world changing to fit my vision, not the other way about.

How do you think China will react, once it has that much power? I hate to be a Jeremiah, but the question has to be asked, and why not in a cheap and colourful science fiction series? Look at how, in the last few days, they've clamped down on protest. How they now find it acceptable to beat up a female Sky journalist and her camera crew just for being there in Beijing pointing a camera at what they're doing. The truth is, the guys in charge – that is the five guys who form the Politburo and run the Chinese Communist Party – don't like instability and they don't really welcome the great changes that are happening to their country, even though they are more than happy to rake in the massive revenues that are the result of those changes. They're using that wealth to fund their space programme, to build up their army and navy and air force, and to pay for the Great Firewall of China, which I think is the greatest threat of all. A genuine threat to

liberty. Because it attacks the most basic freedom we have: the freedom to know.

Do you think science fiction has a role to play as 'Jeremiah'? Do you see *Chung Kuo* as utopian or dystopian fiction?

I've always argued that good SF should be 'prodromic' – offering a warning to us – rather than prophetic, and that's what I always intended *Chung Kuo* to be. A warning. Because the City of Ice that the Han have built in my tale is a living death. It's the very worst of dystopias: one where – and this will come out more clearly in Book Two, *Daylight on Iron Mountain* – its citizens, entrapped within that great world of levels, are forbidden to make any kind of reference to the old world that has been buried beneath the new, and are continually watched to ensure that that's the case. It's a world where even humming an old song (ELP's 'Lucky Man', let's say) can get you into severe trouble with the authorities. It's a heavily censored world, and – again, I'm afraid – the real China seems to be heading down that path like there's no tomorrow.

Why did you feel you needed to show the end of the world, given that in the original series you presented your world as a fait accompli?

I can put this down partly to the aftermath of all the reading I did for *Trillion Year Spree*, back in the mid eighties. I'd observed, back then, how few books ever explained just how those wonderful utopias they envisaged – where the great problem of overpopulation had been solved, and everyone was wonderfully nice to one another – came into being. The one that particularly annoyed me was Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which, like so many others of its kind, refused staunchly to explain how we got to lovely feminist there from nasty, brutal male-dominated now. The urge to fill that gap, to depict in the most graphic way possible just how that massive change would come – a change which would, quite obviously, involve decades of suffering and the death of billions of humans (all of whom would have their individual stories) – grew and grew. I wanted to show the reader that "path of blood" as I saw it.

I've worked hard not to lessen the impact of *The Middle Kingdom*, which really does, as you say, present us with a fait accompli. But there were important issues I wanted to address in the prequels. Through Jake Reed's story – and only half of it is there in *Son of Heaven* – I wanted to show how

awful, how soul-destroying that loss of one's past, one's identity and culture might be. To be denied one's past is to be denied one's humanity. What makes us our memories. I know that for a fact, having watched my father's personality disintegrate over two decades from Alzheimer's. To watch a whole generation – a whole culture – slide down that path is a truly nightmarish vision. But one we need – as science fiction writers – to show if we're to avoid it as our fate.

There's a slightly old-fashioned feel to the sections set in 2065 – the many mentions of 1960s and 1970s music, for example. Were you consciously writing in the British tradition of 'cosy catastrophe'? Absolutely. The society I picture has reverted back beyond our current download era of technology to a time when solid objects – CDs, LPs, tapes – carried the weight of our culture. And I believe this is how it might be, should the West collapse. After all, without a world wide web, how would you get to hear music? iTunes? Gone. Limewire? Gone. So yes, it was deliberate. And, to a degree, it's also a homage to writers like Keith Roberts, John Wyndham, Richard Cowper and the like. There's one big clue in the title to chapter two, 'The Nature of the Catastrophe', which harks right back to Moorcock, M. John Harrison and company, and the *New Worlds* era.

The section set in 2043, on the other hand, is very cyberpunk – the 'datascap' metaphor, secure housing enclaves, personal air transport, far right society... Again, this was a very deliberate strategy on my part. I wanted the society that existed in the days of the Fall to have that feel of division and decadence. My model wasn't a science fictional one at all, but Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*. It's all very Sodom and Gomorrah, and there's a degree to which Jake and his friends deserve what happens to them because they allowed the situation to develop in the way it did. I have two long short stories plotted out for this period, both of which I want to write because their storylines didn't quite fit into the structure of this novel. One is about a Chinese 'sleeper' team in the USA whose job it is to make sure the missile silo they're 'guarding' can't be used – that the missiles won't fly. The other is the story of a simple middle class family falling from grace if you like. It'll depict their descent into nightmare as they become 'unprotected'. How all social niceties can be stripped away from you by the pressure to survive.



SLEIGHT OF HAND

Peter S. Beagle

Tachyon, 326pp, \$14.95 pb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

I first encountered Peter S. Beagle's writing as a teenager when I read *The Last Unicorn*. It was love at first sight, a love further strengthened when I read his first novel, *A Fine and Private Place*, so different in subject matter yet so clearly a product of the same skewed imagination. Beagle laid out his themes early on and his best stories still return to them.

His men are often gauche but blessed with a way of putting right the deeper problems even as they fumble the everyday tasks, maybe learning a little more about themselves as well. Schmendrick, the magician from *The Last Unicorn*, is the classic example: in 'The Woman Who Married the Man in the Moon', set prior to the novel, he meets a widow and her two children, grieving for the loss of a husband and father. The story explores ways of dealing with life by telling stories, hardly an uncommon theme, but the encounter between magician and woman is so delicately drawn as to lift it out of the ordinary.

In turn, it picks up another regular theme in Beagle's work. His characters are rarely the usual noble or evil inhabitants of epic fantasy. Instead, Beagle focuses on the ordinary people, whose smallholdings are destroyed as armies sweep by, or who make their living as servants or artisans.

Indeed, the closer that Beagle moves to more conventional fantasy tropes the less interesting his stories seem to become, as though he loses sympathy for the characters. Thus, while I enjoyed the early sections of 'What Tune The Enchantress Plays' I found myself less engaged by Breyia Drom once she assumed her powers as enchantress.

It is with the offbeat story that Beagle really shines. 'La Lune T'attend', in which Arcenaux and Garrigue, two Cajun old-timers who also happen to be werewolves are stalked by a third werewolf, seeking revenge, after they despatched him as punishment for a particularly vile murder, is undoubtedly a well-made werewolf story in its own right. However, what really makes this story is its portrayal of a long friendship between two men. Beagle has always written well about age, and oddly enough he also has a knack for writing about the young, as shown in 'The Rock in the Park', where two teenage boys encounter a family of centaurs in a New York park, and 'The Rabbi's Hobby', in which an elderly rabbi and a teenage boy set out to discover the identity of a mysterious woman in a photograph. But again, as Beagle moves closer to the conventional, the stories don't seem to work so well. 'The Bridge Partner' about a stalker promises much but lacks that certain spark while 'Vanishing' is saved only by the fact that its ageing protagonist, Jansen, is so well drawn.

Beagle strives for variety – there are several entertaining written-to-order pieces included here – but his *métier* is the closely observed character study. I wonder sometimes if Beagle isn't a little too careful with his characters. He is very generous to them; they rarely die pointless deaths and they rarely die brutally. Violence is saved for those most deserving of it; Beagle's is a very traditional view of the moral balance. Some stories teeter on the edge of sentimentality but Beagle invariably pulls back from the brink just in time. If he could be accused of anything, it would be of showing more compassion for his characters than is nowadays fashionable.

One probably either loves Beagle's writing or else finds it a little maybe a little old-fashioned. Beagle himself has expressed a certain distaste for much modern fantasy writing. Nonetheless, few can match him when it comes to a particular mix of the fantastic and the ordinary, with a tinge of nostalgia. As one character observes, the magic is in the telling, always.

**EMBRACE
FAKING IT
LIBERTY SPIN
MEMESIS
SEGUE**
Keith Brooke

**THE ANGELS OF LIFE AND DEATH
A WRITER'S LIFE**
Eric Brown

TAKE NO PRISONERS
John Grant

**MONTERRA'S DELICIOSA & OTHER
TALES
SPOTTED LILY**
Anna Tambour

ONE MORE UNFORTUNATE
Kaitlin Queen

infinity plus, £0.86–£2.18, Kindle

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

Much has changed in the world of publishing since Keith Brooke launched infinityplus.co.uk back in the late summer of 1997, not least the industry's big boys getting the collective heebie-jeebies once they saw major music labels and retailers scrambling around for new business models in the wake of digital downloading – and realised that they were next in line.

Brooke set up infinityplus.co.uk with a simple aim: to give interested readers free access to a wide range of quality SF and fantasy short stories which, while they may have been published to great acclaim in some of the field's most respected magazines (such as *Interzone*), could easily become impossible to track down. Print magazines, after all, are not the most durable of items (even assuming you live in their country of publication), while anthologies/collections necessarily collect only a small fraction of stories being published. Brooke's website certainly proved popular; by 2007, when a halt was called on its further expansion, infinityplus.co.uk had become an archive for more than two million words worth of not just fiction but also a choice selection of book reviews, articles and author interviews.

However, digital publishing's move into the cultural mainstream has been driven primarily by technology; most people are just not comfortable reading even relatively short fiction on a website, especially if that

means they have to do so sat in front of their desktop computer. Which is doubtless why Brooke has now moved into a more recognisable form of electronic publishing with the launch of a new line of 'proper' digital books (complete with cover art), which can be easily purchased through sites including Amazon (both UK and US versions), Barnes and Noble, and Smashwords. Unlike the website, there is a cost involved, but with prices currently ranging from 86p to £2.18, we're hardly talking about readers needing to arrange a mortgage.

The first selection of infinity plus books thankfully offers as eclectic and excellent a range of stories as you might expect from the website.

Eric Brown was one of Brooke's initial supporters, so it's only fair that two of the first infinity plus eBooks feature his work. *The Angels of Life and Death* brings together ten of his distinctive SF stories; six are what he himself terms 'core SF – stories ... featuring the staple tropes of aliens telepathy, star travel, futuristic sports, etc,' while the final quartet of first-person narratives are decidedly more contemporary and character-driven. Stylistically, these latter stories are a good indicator of *A Writer's Life*, Brown's genuinely haunting novella about a mid-list writer's increased obsession with the life and work of a forgotten author who disappeared in 'mysterious' circumstances back in 1996.

In contrast, the Hugo- and World Fantasy Award-winning author John Grant can be a harsher, though no less literate, writer. *Take No Prisoners* brings together fifteen stories that mix brutality with literary and linguistic style – the story 'The Dead Monkey Puzzle' being a particularly dark tale of cosmic justice and the use of the imagination to overcome a particularly vile reality.

Although set up as a reprint archive, infinityplus.co.uk did occasionally publish original work, and this habit is carried into the new line of eBooks. So, for example, there's the somewhat earnest crime novel *One More Unfortunate* by Kaitlin Queen – a pseudonym for (we are told) a well-established children's writer. While it's always good to see a publisher giving even an established author the chance to do something different, it's fair to say that the most pleasant surprise from this first run of eBooks is Australian author Anna Tambour.

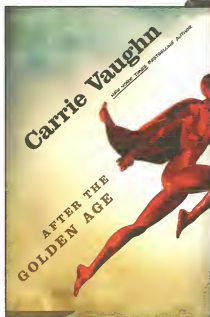
Tambour could be called an infinity plus

'discovery' – a check of the collection's publishing history shows that most of *Monterra's Deliciosa & Other Tales* have seen the light of day either on infinityplus.co.uk or in this very collection. This is no slight to her achievements as a writer. *Monterra's Deliciosa* is a delicious collection of often startling and outrageous tales. Indeed, so concentrated are these short stories, you may well be initially disappointed by her first novel, *Spotted Lily* – a tale about a young, wannabe Australian writer who makes a deal with the Devil. But, while it seems a tad slower and low-key, the accumulative power of her writing is arguably just as startling.

The final author represented in this initial run of infinity plus books is Keith Brooke himself, with some forty five stories split, either thematically or in terms of subject and tone, between five different collections – so, for example, if you prefer his 'strange' tales you can forgo his more overtly 'scientific' collection. This is no simple case of vanity publishing, however; for starters, these are stories that first saw the light of day in magazines ranging from *Interzone* and *Aboriginal SF* to *Peeping Tom* and *Skeleton Crew* – so they've already completed a thorough quality control process before arriving here. If the author has pulled rank at all, it is only in allowing himself the opportunity to follow each story with an authorial 'afterword' commenting on either the tale's origins or some pertinent personal context. Whether readers gain an additional understanding of the stories or the author's work is open to debate; certainly, though, they should have been more clearly signposted as 'extras'.

Ah yes, extras... Just like DVDs, there are already growing expectations that eBooks should include 'added value' features exploiting the technological potential of the devices on which they are read.

For the most part, these infinity plus eBooks restrict their 'bonus material' to additional stories, which (to be frank) is simply 'more' under the guise of 'extra'. Of course, adding active web and multimedia content (such as audio and video files) costs money, and can all too easily end up being gimmicky and distracting. However, if infinity plus intend to stay at the forefront of this new publishing world, it may well be something they need to consider in the future, especially if – like me – you're reading the books on something as powerful as an iPad.

**AFTER THE GOLDEN AGE****Carrie Vaughn**

Tor, 304pp, \$24.99 hb

Reviewed by Ian Hunter

Celia West is about to be kidnapped. Again. She's almost getting used to it, since it happens fairly regularly; usually when she has plans – places to go, people to see – so it is a way to really ruin her day. The reason for this unwanted attention is not that she is the heir to the West fortune, which you think would be reason enough to kidnap her, it's because some not-so-great criminal minds have decided that this is a way to keep her mother and father preoccupied and distracted while they carry out a major crime in Commerce City. Not that it's actually worked out like that so far, as Celia's father wouldn't let a little thing like the safety of his only child interfere with his life's work of putting the bad guys behind bars.

You see, Warren West is actually Captain Olympus, the most powerful man on the planet and leader of the super-powered team known as the Olympiad. And Celia's mother, the glamorous Suzanne West, is otherwise known as Spark, the mistress of heat and flame. With the superfast Bullet and the telepathic Dr Mentis, they make up the superhero team. There are others. Once they were the new super kids on the block, and now people hardly remember that, before them, the masked vigilante known as the Hawk kept the city safe for twenty years before just quitting and handing in his notice to the police commissioner.



only to come back and be thwarted in his attempts to destroy Commerce City.

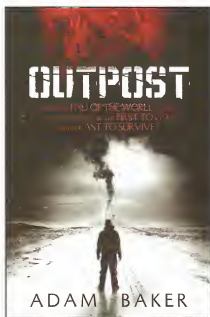
Eventually the District Attorney has had enough and decides on another approach to bring down Sito, but for this he will need the reluctant help of Celia West, forensic accountant, to do it. Thus begins one ordinary woman's quest to prove that the greatest criminal mind in the world has committed tax fraud, and maybe while on that path she can find true love and finally gain the respect of her parents (particularly her father), even if she has to put up with being kidnapped a few more times.

After the Golden Age is a deceptively easy read, which is not to diminish Vaughn's narrative powers, as her writing style appears to be in some sort of pseudo-first-person present tense (which it isn't) but it still succeeds in sucking the reader into the story and into Celia's heart and mind, making us root for her and wanting her to succeed in her quest to move on from growing up as the daughter of the two most famous people on the planet. Imagine if your dad was Superman but you haven't talked to him for years since you always fall out because he's really a hot-headed jerk who resorts to punching holes in the wall when he doesn't get his way. Everyone thinks he's fantastic – a great man, a great hero – but, to you, he's just Dad, and not a very good one at that.

On one level we have a book that reads like a mixture of family saga, love story, detective yarn and mystery. On another level we have something that asks deeper questions about human frailty and vulnerability, and is reminiscent of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and DC's magnificent *Kingdom Come* series, asking what would happen superheroes really did exist and what would that do to the lives of ordinary people. Ultimately, would the citizens of Commerce City be better off without them?

Recommended.

There are other superheroes in the city, but they are not members of the Olympiad and are considered to be loose cannons who are not up to the task of taking on Simon Sito – the Destructor – who has been jailed and committed many times but has always managed to escape

**OUTPOST****Adam Baker**

Hodder & Stoughton, 370pp, £12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

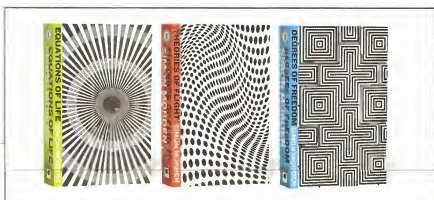
One of the problems with literary thrillers is that they are seldom all that thrilling when compared to your average action movie. Stieg Larson and Dan Brown have sold millions of books but their characters are far more likely to hop online or shout "To the library!" than they are to pick up an assault rifle. That which is thrilling on the page is seldom all that thrilling on the silver screen. However, in the shadow of the formulaic Templar-bothering band wagon-jumpers that clog the best-seller lists a number of authors have been trying to bridge the gap between the popular literary thriller and the Hollywood action movie. King of this particular sub-genre is Matthew Reilly. Reilly's novels (including the popular *Scarecrow* series) feature hardly any characterisation, world-building or plot; instead they are collections of elegantly composed and flawlessly paced set-pieces, twists and cliffhangers that produce exactly the kind of brainless thrill ride you'd get if you crossed Tom Clancy with Robert Rodriguez. Adam Baker's first novel *Outpost* is an attempt to enter this particular corner of the market.

Kasker Rampart was once a floating city. A vast oil refinery in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, Rampart was once a glimmer of light in a cold and bleakly desolate landscape. Now it stands nearly empty, its thousand strong crew whittled

down to a handful of depressed and isolated souls stuck in their miserable ruts because they have nowhere else to go. Then the world ends. Through flickering images and a storm of static they see a disease rise up and turn humanity into what are effectively zombies. As the crew of the refinery realise that nobody is coming to save them, they start to draw up plans that might allow them to survive the rapidly approaching arctic winter. Fiercely atmospheric and written with both elegance and economy, this admittedly somewhat unoriginal snapshot from the end of the world contains much promise, particularly from a first-time author. But then things start to go hideously wrong.

Within the first hundred pages of *Outpost*, the crew of Kasker Rampart find themselves dealing with rescue missions, zombie incursions, fires, explosions and crashing space capsules. From there the novel moves on to sinister cults, cruise ships manned by the undead, weird medical experiments, assumed identities and graveyards for nuclear submarines. However, while the novel certainly covers a lot of ground at break-neck speed, all of this rushing about fails to result in very much in the way of actual excitement. In truth, *Outpost* is an unrelentingly dull piece of writing.

There is more to your average action film than a series of well-constructed fight scenes and explosions. As well as knowing how to design an impressive set-piece, writers of action films must also know how to space out their action sequences so as to maximise their impact. Unfortunately, this is not a skill that Baker has managed to acquire. The problem is that the amount of tension a scene contains is not a function of its subject matter (e.g. explosions and shoot-out) but of relative differences in pacing. Indeed, the reason why even the dumbest of action films have romantic sub-plots is because these sub-plots give the writers an excuse to slow the pace down in between action sequences. Audiences do not perceive pace in absolute terms; they experience acceleration and it is this sense of acceleration and relative change of pace that creates a sense of excitement and tension. By refusing to change gears once the characters are introduced and the scene is set, Baker has produced a novel that lacks relative changes in pace and so lacks tension and excitement. This is a novel written in a single monotonous register best summarised as doom, gloom and ka-boom. There is nothing so painfully dull as endless unremitting excitement.



EQUATIONS OF LIFE

Simon Morden

Orbit, 346pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

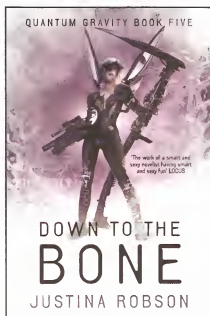
The first volume of Simon Morden's trilogy finds Samuil Petrovitch, a young Russian refugee, working as a post-grad in a post-Armageddon London which is now known as the Metrozone (no relation). Armageddon was brought about some twenty years previously when religious fundamentalists got fed up waiting for God and decided to take it into their own hands using suitcase nukes. The world is a bit of a mess but most of it is still here with the crucial exception of Japan. Petrovitch is a genius who is only marginally eclipsed in the brain stakes by his co-researcher, Pif. Between them they discover the Grand Unified Theory, but things kick off in a big way when two crime syndicates start to come to blows. One is Japanese, led by Oshicora whose main goal is to recreate lost Japan as a virtual country. He's the very epitome of that non-existent creature, the crime lord with a sense of honour. The other is led by a Ukrainian who is a more traditional gangster although it is hard to believe many Ukrainians would have a picture of Stalin hanging in their office. That would be a bit like finding a Palestinian with a picture of Benjamin Netanyahu on his desk.

Anyway, one morning Petrovitch is out for a walk when he foils an attempted kidnapping of a seventeen-year-old girl and they go on the run. The thugs come after them and they are rescued by someone who is straight out of a small press comic book – a nun with a gun. This image nearly derails the novel and it can take a while for the reader to clamber back on board. Anyway, it turns out that there is a new order in the church which functions as an armed wing – the order of St Joan. The rescued girl is the

daughter of Oshicora, so Petrovitch rapidly becomes caught up in the politics of the underworld. As it happens he has quite a back story himself and wasn't so squeaky clean as his nerdy appearance makes him out to be. With a gang war raging, things then lurch sideways with the start of a Machine Jihad that seems to be tied in with the plans for virtual Japan. The Metrozone descends into violent chaos.

It's a fast-moving, action-packed novel, although the action seems to be largely conveyed through dialogue. This is a shame as Morden's dialogue can be lumpy and clichéd (although, to be fair to the characters, they sometimes use clichés in a knowing way). Morden is capable of throwing in economical little elements of descriptive prose that sparkle before your eyes but he continues to pile on the dry dialogue all the same. This becomes particularly bizarre in Petrovitch's case as our hero takes an enormous amount of punishment throughout the course of the novel. He starts off with a pacemaker and in need of a heart transplant and, as the plot progresses, bits literally start to fall off him. Yet he never stops with the wise-cracks. Emotion is something that's observed rather than felt, and unresolved sexual tension thickens the air around him.

Equations of Life feels rushed, coming across more like a wannabe Hollywood action blockbuster than a novel, and its reheated cyberpunk will be familiar to anybody who was reading science fiction two decades ago. It will be followed at monthly intervals by parts two and three of the *Metrozone* trilogy; an intriguing gambit on Orbit's part but it should work because, flawed as it is, *Equations of Life* is still an enjoyable romp. Picking up the sequels in quick succession will probably keep more of the readers on board than having them wait a year for the next one with the attendant risk that the trilogy will drop from mind.

**DOWN TO THE BONE**

Justina Robson

Gollancz, 352pp, £12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Juliet E. McKenna

Reviewing the fifth book in a series, it's impossible to cover key elements without spoiling earlier twists in the cumulative narrative. So if you're not up to speed with Lila Black's (mis)adventures, catch up before reading this. Fasten your seatbelt; that will be a bumpy ride.

Lila's a speed fan. This story opens with her rebuilding an antique Ducati motorbike. It helps that she can transform one hand into a vice and the other into a power tool, thanks to the invulnerable cyborg nature underlying her feminine appearance. We see Lila working through Zal's eyes; her beloved husband whom she thought was dead, who's now...let's just say...recovered.

Beginning with Zal is an astute authorial choice. Like so many in this story, his dual nature means he must learn to live with inherent tensions and contradictions. Lila's search for peace with herself, to understand what it truly means to be human, is a central theme of this series. Broadening the perspective at this juncture adds new impetus by challenging Lila's conclusions thus far. This particular focus also veils inevitable repetition as their catching up neatly enables Robson to recap key aspects of the story. Not that Zal's about to offer full disclosure. He seeks out Lila's secrets but isn't ready to share all his own.

Then there's Teazle, the demon whom Lila married for strategic reasons but has

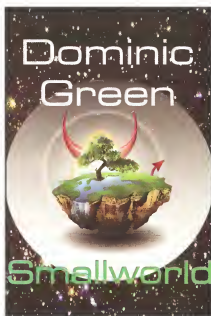
come to...love? He has his own perspective on life; transitions are hard but everyone must make them. He just tackles every challenge head-on, leading to as many unexpected complications as solutions.

Lila has more concerns than romance, since the fabric of space time is ripping. Why, and can anything be done? These big questions have spawned myriad lesser ones. Why are the dead returning, including Lila's own sister Max? Not as zombies but as fully recreated beloved friends and family who go out to eat in diners and have their own online networks. So much harder to cope with than a shambling zombie easily flattened with a cricket bat. No wonder the people of Otopia, our primordial realm, want rid of the supernatural. The heady, exciting days after the quantum bomb gave them access to Alfheim, Faery and Demonia are long gone.

As this energetic, intriguing story unfolds, Robson looks through the surface of genre clichés to far more challenging questions beneath, tying these in turn to this series' ongoing meditation on human nature. To what extent are we shaped by memory, guilt, love, humiliation or rage? Which of these can we leave behind? What do we lose in the process? Does love ennoble or encumber us?

Lila's mostly encumbered by the ancient faery dress which she acquired two books ago. It shapes itself into garments ranging from the ludicrous to the fantastically apt, as Lila works with the Agency that originally made her, trying to find answers to all of the above. Robson's multifaceted talent as a writer is perhaps epitomised by this dress. Her enjoyment of the ridiculous and deftness with pop culture references weave sparkling humour through the metaphysics of matter, energy and magic. Similarly full-on action scenes complement the thankfully lucid philosophical conversations. And of course, threads, warp and weft, weaving and cutting have been metaphors for life, death and their associated questions through myth and folklore for millennia.

Robson spins a masterly yarn. Where previous volumes inevitably left loose ends, this final volume is tightly written with a denouement that brings together all the strands of the cumulative, intricate plot as well as the underlying debates giving such depth to this series. Discovering who's behind what has happened explains both how and why and Lila's journey proves as crucial as her destination. As philosophers and physicists all tell us, everything is connected.

**SMALLWORLD**

Dominic Green

Fingerpress, 282pp, £9.99 pb

Reviewed by Jack Deighton

The Smallworld of the title, known as Mount Ararat, has come about as the result of the merging of two separate planetoids under the influence of an extremely dense neutronium sphere, now at its heart. It orbits within the rings of Naphil, a Jovian world in the solar system of a red giant star, 23 Kranii. Mount Ararat has at most a few hundred inhabitants but the book concentrates on the Reborn-In-Jesus family and their protector, an armed robot they know as the Devil. In accord with all these biblical resonances the extended family's children have names such as Testament, God's Wound, Beguiled-Of-The-Serpent, Only-God-Is-Perfect, and Be-Not-Near-Unto-Man-In-Thy-Time-Of-Uncleaness.

Described on the credits page as a novel, *Smallworld* is in fact a series of shorter pieces related only in the sense that they all feature members of the Reborn-In-Jesus family and take place in the same setting. The resultant lack of narrative flow, of an overall arc, its stop-start nature, compromises the book as a coherent whole. The five, or seven, stories (the last has three sub sections) relate the family's encounters with various incomers whose appearances can be unexplained. The tone is kept deliberately light throughout, and thus runs into a further problem.

With very few exceptions SF and comedy do not make comfortable bedfellows. Too

often the comedy unbalances the SF or else is not comic enough. The most successful mix the two seamlessly, embed them in each other, and the result can still be a cogent comment on human – or alien – affairs. The SF must also stand on its own merits and not be entirely derivative. Unfortunately, in *Smallworld*, Green does not always successfully manage to avoid the pitfalls inherent in the form.

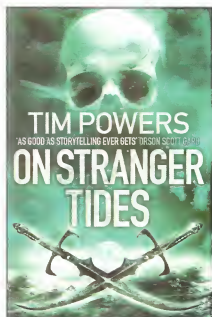
The book's fundamental lack of seriousness is deleterious. Its targets for satire are either too easy or too pat – jailbirds, space pirates, tax collectors – and its references scattershot (Santa Claus/Father Christmas, Helen of Troy, a plethora of biblical allusions over and above the manifold Reborn-In-Jesuses, as well as casual allusions to 21st century ephemera of which the inhabitants of Mount Ararat would most likely be totally ignorant – though we, of course, are not). The ramifications for daily life of the structure of a small world as described here are for the most part unexplored.

In addition, the cosmology of the book is unconvincing, the Physics and Chemistry of dubious lineage and accuracy. An example: sulphur dioxide, while noxious, does not smell of rotten eggs – that is hydrogen sulphide. Small errors such as this can fatally undermine confidence in the author and in the tales he or she is trying to tell.

At the level of the fiction, rather than experiencing background as the stories unfold, we find prodigious information dumping and paragraphs of expository dialogue. With sufficient guile this can be a strength and elsewhere has been made into a feature of the comedy (galactic encyclopaedia anyone?) but no such approach is adopted here.

There is, too, the lurking sense that Green has not lavished care on his characters, who are unconvincing, barely more than ciphers, present only to progress the plot(s) and voice the jokes, hence failing to engage empathy. Quite apart from the family other names can be over elaborate, some characters being known mainly by their job descriptions – Optometrist Wong, Social Correctness Officer Asahara. Others, for no obvious reason, "speak" in CAPITALS. This hostage to fortune invites invidious comparisons with a previous purveyor of comedic SF/fantasy.

If your tastes lean towards comedy with not much rigour this may be for you. If your preference is for strongly drawn, nuanced characters reacting to and combating life's vicissitudes, then maybe not.



ON STRANGER TIDES

Tim Powers

Corvus, 405pp, £7.99 pb

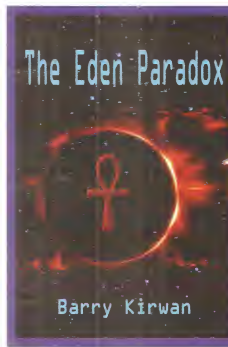
Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

The occasion for this reissue of Tim Powers' *On Stranger Tides* is, of course, the release of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film of the same name, fourth in the series. At this stage, one can only speculate as to how much of the novel has found its way into the film; one can however marvel at

how certain elements of the novel seem curiously familiar to anyone who has seen the earlier films. Our hero is Jack Chandagnac, puppeteer and bookkeeper, who is travelling to the Caribbean to confront his uncle, Sebastian, who has stolen Jack's inheritance.

However, when Jack's ship is boarded by pirates his life changes forever. He becomes Jack Shandy, quartermaster to Philip Davies who is not only captain of the *Vociferous Carmichael* but a magician of sorts, and an associate of Blackbeard, who is planning the most audacious exploit of his career, to locate the Fountain of Youth. Matters are further complicated by the presence of corrupt magicians Benjamin Hurwood and Leo Friend, both of whom have magical designs on Hurwood's daughter, Elizabeth.

Revisiting this novel after many years, I am struck first by how much fun this novel is to read, and secondly by how well wrought it is. In a narrative that features voodoo, zombies, magic and pirates, it would be all too easy to be carried away by the possibilities for vast dramatic set-pieces but Powers is pleasingly restrained and thoughtful in his story-telling. The historical and the fantastic elements are nicely balanced, and I particularly like the underlying flavour of elegiac nostalgia for the romance of piracy, even as the novel acknowledges the brutal reality. Whatever the film turns out to be like, as a novel *On Stranger Tides* remains well worth a reader's attention.



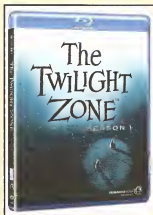
The Eden Paradox: where humanity's only hope for survival may be the key to its demise...

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• BLOOD REICH - BLOODRAYNE 3

• THE DEVIL'S TOMB

• DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

• I SAW THE DEVIL*

• PANDEMIC

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*WIN A BLU-RAY!

MADE IN SPAIN

Arrow Video re-release four B-movies as the **FANTASTIC FACTORY** collection on DVD in a boxset (18 April), while the selections are also offered singly, with Brian Yuzna's **Beyond Re-Animator** (15 April) and his **Faust: Love of the Damned** (9 May), followed by Paco Plaza's **Romasanta: The Werewolf Hunt** (16 May), and then Jack Sholder's **Arachnid** (6 June).

Never sickly deranged as recent cult schlock *Human Centipede*, but just as loony in its outlook, *Beyond Re-Animator* (2003) was the second sequel to Stuart Gordon's classic farce *Re-Animator* (1985), which Yuzna produced. Continuing the Herbert West story from where Yuzna's own *Re-Animator 2* (aka: *Bride of Re-Animator*, 1990) left off, we find the resurrection-obsessed killer in prison where he's persisted with furtive experiments for 13 years. Now, Dr Howard Phillips (natch!), who as a boy was at the crime scene of West's notorious Miskatonic massacre, delivers a phial of West's luminescent green 'reagent' to the Arkham state penitentiary. After reviving a heart attack victim in the prison hospital, West recruits Howie as his accomplice, exploring insanely 'practical' applications of his theoretical breakthrough about nano-plasmic energy (NPE = 'soul'), collecting and storing such nano-plasm into a little battery for transference later on. He claims a victory for bioscience, as this fresh wrinkle to West's re-animation miracle is expected to ensure all new zombies retain their mental faculties.

Beyond Re-Animator was as imaginatively gory as fans expected. It retells the medical myths of Gordon's movie while segueing into coolly sardonic



black comedy with many darkly amusing threads woven through a mesh of minor subplots. 'Howie' Phillips is a young doctor in love, of course, quite smitten by Laura (Elsa Patsky, *Give 'Em Hell, Malone*; Argento's *Giallo*), a journalist plotting an exposé scoop, after interviewing the lecherous, sadistic warden. Soon, she is a zombified survivor, apparently 'normalised', but prone to agonising seizures. The prison's electric chair is all ready for tortures and execution, and the famed mortuary madness of earlier *Re-Animators* translates here into some chaotic rioting by violent inmates. Benefiting from its mix of animatronic prosthetic effects and CGI wizardry, Yuzna's crazy horror show blends rubbery make-ups with digital distortions, stirs in the director's penchant for sexualising the heroine into dominatrix mode, includes a now obligatory exploding-body sequence, gets plenty of new mileage from the iconic image of a syringe full of glowing serum, and finds time for a unique severed penis vs undead rat epilogue. However, what makes the whole *Re-Animator* trilogy succeed is Jeffrey Combs because, even after such a varied career in TV and films, Herbert West is his signature role. It's a superbly affected performance, a tetchily brusque portrayal that Yuzna admits has very little to do with Lovecraft's original 1920s' serials, but it is a characterisation which



the inimitable Combs has made very much his own. And for *Beyond Re-Animator*, he transforms his Frankensteinian alter ego into the maverick hero, without ever losing his utter contempt for standard moralities of life-and-death as we know it!

"What do you know about the face of evil?" Combs plays a cop in Yuzna's *Faust* (2000), another film from the 'director of the damned'. In this modern day version of the legend, pretty psychiatrist Dr Jade de Camp (Isabel Brook, of *Razor Blade Smile*), haunted by her abused childhood, visits disturbed artist Jaspers (Brit TV actor Mark Frost), and saves him from suicide in the asylum. However, Jaspers prefers trading in his 'immortal soul' for power of vengeance, getting wolverine style forked razor claws as wrist-band weapons, and he's urged by slimy villain 'M' (campy Andrew Divoff) to "go forth and mutilate" – starting with a sadistic gang that killed his muse and model.

From rubber room antics to Grand Guignol theatrics and ironic decadence, *Faust* has the appeal of sharp editing to enhance nightmare imagery of devilish transformation, when Jaspers is buried alive but escapes from hell and returns from beyond the grave as a caped crusader with maniacal vigilante saviour tendencies, fighting the decadent corruption (Yuzna borrows from his own directorial debut *Society*, 1989), fostered by M. This is based

on an indie comic book series launched in 1988 by David Quinn and Tim Vigil whose *Faust* was clearly a notable influence on Todd McFarlane's later, more popular comic *Spawn* (1992), and that book's own 1997 movie adaptation. We also find similar afterlife 'superhero' themes in James O'Barr's comics hit *The Crow* (1989), filmed by Alex Proyas in 1994, which tangles up any copycat claims, but does not dilute the sheer novelty of Yuzna's singularly twisted B-movie contribution to generic black farce as superhero cinema.

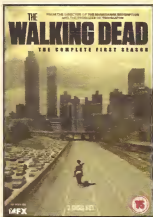
I have mentioned Plaza's *Romasanta* (2004) before (interview with Spanish filmmakers in *Black Static* #6), so I won't go into details here. Suffice to say, this period mystery with low-calorie gore has a werewolf on trial as a serial killer, and it remains wholly fascinating throughout the second viewing.

Arachnid (2001) is a fairly standard monster movie from the director of sci-fi horror *The Hidden* (1987). Mysterious disease from a tropical island is traced back to a giant alien spider, which appears to have arrived on Earth via a UFO that caused the loss of a US stealth aircraft in the opening sequence. The missing navy aviator's sister is also a pilot, and so she flies local medics and trigger-happy ex-soldiers to investigate source of the weird infection but, like that military jet before them, their plane ditches. From shoreline into jungle,

reluctant heroine Mercer (Alex Reid, *Wilderness*, *The Descent*, TV's *Misfits*) helps the armed research team solve the mystery but cannot avert a massacre when everyone is stalked by fast and fierce creatures with eight spindly legs... Offbeat humour, ghastly horrors prompted by mutant 'ticks' burrow into bodies, unfortunate victims cocooned alive, and briskly sketched-in characters that are only brought to life by varied perilous situations, mean this vaguely spoofing re-mix of *Aliens* (1986) and *Predator* (1987) is horribly dated but never dull and still fairly watchable.

Arachnid rode a millennial wave of comparable movies, including Gary Jones' *Spiders* (2000), Sam Firstenberg's *Spiders 2* (2001), and Scott Ziehl's *Earth vs. The Spider* (2001), a tepid remake of Bert I. Gordon's 1958 film; but they were all topped by hyper cool fun of *Eight-Legged Freaks* (2002), boosted by superior visual effects. Other productions from Fantastic Factory are Stuart Gordon's *Dagon* (2001), Jaime Balaguer's *Darkness* (2002), Yuzna's *Rottweiler* (2004) and *Beneath Still Waters* (2006), and *The Nun* (aka: *La Monja*, 2005) directed by Luis de la Madrid. Although they're of variable quality, whether filmed in English or Spanish, it's notable that this nifty genre batch may be worth a look for completists as none of the nine are rubbish in any way that makes them too boring to watch.

WIN!



UNIVERSAL SQUADRONS (aka: *Minuteman*), on DVD, 28 March, evokes the *Universal Soldier* franchise launched in 1992 by Roland Emmerich, but with a witty, philickian, *Manchurian Candidate* tweak. US Army clerk Lance (Riley Smith, *Gallowalker*) is home from Iraq but fails at returning to civilian life and suffers disturbing flashbacks to a hospital massacre. On the ranch, blonde girlfriend Becca (Willa Ford, *Friday the 13th* remake) is alarmed by Lance's increasingly manic behaviour, while crusty old warhorse on disability Deakin (Barry Corbin, TV series *Northern Exposure*) advises Lance that alcoholism usually solves familiar 'problems' of recurring nightmares. However, following blackouts, our hero wakes up in a secure hospital room where he refuses neurological treatment, while suspecting he's been 'reprogrammed' to believe that the 'mission' performed overseas was just a video game he played. Indifferently co-written yet competently directed by Mark Millhone, this only achieves TV movie standard of technical proficiency, especially in its sci-fi aspects. Some dismally unappealing performances and clichéd soap opera dialogue are shunted aside when Lance's emergency response to a farm accident inadvertently reveals superhuman abilities. While he's under close surveillance by shadowy bionic watchdog 'Peacemaker' (Christian Kane, *Leverage*), paranoid hero Lance turns psycho against a military conspiracy of secret experiments. Although gruff heavy Kane brings a certain understated degree of menace to confrontations, hapless Smith just isn't a convincing match as nominal cowboy hero Lance, especially in the two supermen's gunslinger showdown, so their inevitable final duel lacks the requisite comic book style or emotional pathos.



Harry Potter movies emerged from the cooed world of populist kids-lit fantasy to become a noticeably uneven franchise. Even some fans of J.K. Rowling's books admit the first two adaptations (directed by Chris Columbus) were slow/witless. When Alfonso Cuarón took the reins for the restless *Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), followed by Mike Newell's *Goblet of Fire* (2005), things picked up favourably, with new broader-than-nerdy appeal defined chiefly by giving the young heroine something to do (before, she was only at school to sharpen Harry's pencils). But, sadly, with David Yates directing, for *Order of the Phoenix* (2007) and brooding *Half-Blood Prince* (2009), attempts to examine increasingly darker themes simply to compete with the melodramatics of coming-of-age plot shifts, just resulted in the gloomiest of visuals – draining colours and vitality from youth adventures that, perhaps, should have been promoting magic and mythic wonder as something positive. Seventh picture **HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS – PART ONE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 11 April), again with Yates directing,

sees little has changed in the neo-Dickensian realm of miserabilist sorcery. The multi-decoy flights through bleak skies of coal-sack storm clouds and ashen CGI-wrangled lightning to a safe house, end in a minor tragedy from betrayal. After spectral death-eaters gatecrash a support-cast wedding, the 'ministry of magic' falls to bad influence of a wizards'/witches cabal with fascist culture/politics, beginning a diabolical purge which outlaws teen heroes Harry, Hermione and Ron, on the run in London and home counties, searching – no, questing, obviously – for a 'horcrux' mcguffin. Dark satirical sequence of magical underworld's civil servants, who commute into work by 'flushing' themselves down public toilets, gives way to some busy offices/urban imagery clearly filching off Gilliam's *Brazil*. An evil serpent attacks Harry on Xmas Eve. Teleportation offers easy escape options. It's a risky business opening a locket of doom that can only be destroyed by Arthurian sword. Episodic narrative is further broken up by pointless asides, like sepia tinted animation of a 'Three Brothers' fairy tale reading by Hermione for downtime embellishment,



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(John Carpenter's *The Ward* has been postponed until October, along with our review and competition. Please look for coverage in a future *Interzone* or *Black Static*.)

revealing the legend of Deathly Hallows while "oh, your tea's gone cold." The usual Potter-mania metaphor of magic wands as phallic symbols is best represented as "Blackthorn, ten inches." Free elf Dobby suffers a hero's death. As wicked Bellatrix, Helena Bonham Carter (a former Morgan Le Fey in TV's *Merlin*, 1998) acts everyone else off the screen, tormenting humans and goblins alike with a spite and gleeful menace that none of the other adult players can hope or even dare to equal. Perhaps, as in the *LOTR* trilogy, the primary sci-fi interpretation of *Harry Potter* is apocalypse or disarmament with only a faint dancing light on the horizon for social progression of adulthood from our childish self-destructive impulses? But let's not be hasty about reading too much into nanny Rowling's moralistic guff. Whether you'd prefer brighter trad Victorian nursery styling, or the more peculiar tones of anglicised Grimm faerie mode, the plain fact remains that, despite its soap opera/sitcom lapses, Constance M. Burge's US TV series *Charmed* (1998–2006) still offers better fantasy fun entertainment than any of the often disappointingly silly-not-serious *Potter* films, while as exploration of growing pains for another kind of orphaned 'chosen one' the meteor freak school days of Clark Kent and super-friends in *Smallville* were regularly more fascinating, with emotionally rewarding adventures (despite agonisingly slower progress towards heroic maturity), than reticent Harry's terms of hard lessons learnt from the nostalgically bookish, dusty elitism of backwards Hogwarts. If this franchise hopes to elevate Potter to genuine plainclothes British superhero, the makers could do far worse than pinch more action from Tolkien, and borrow more surrealism from Gilliam's daydreams and wisdom.



Nothing on telly again? Sick of hearing about how, according to today's programme makers, every new (obviously cross-genre!) show just happens to not be sci-fi? It is worth remembering here that the utter lameness of British genre TV since the mid-1980s can be summed up as: a meagre 17 episodes of genius in *The Prisoner*, only one season of the futuristic *UFO* produced, but we got ten long years of cheesy sitcom *Red Dwarf*, while the latest Time Lord incarnation of the recently lamentable *Doctor Who* looks about 12 years old. Exactly who is today's often alarmingly bad TV sci-fi actually being aimed at? (I mean, if *Torchwood* did not exist then it would be quite certainly unnecessary to invent it!) Making its hi-def debut, while it's also being re-released on DVD, **THE TWILIGHT ZONE – SEASON ONE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 18 April) was launched in 1959 and shot in b&w – yet, like its companion/successor series *Outer Limits* (1963–5), "nothing is wrong with your television set." A showcase for dizzying time-slips and bleak premonitions, psych experiments and identity crises, whacky escapist delusions and shattering realities, ambitions of heroism and parables of despair, *Twilight Zone* defined unlimited scope of genre TV as "the dimension of imagination." With astutely comical wit and grandly philosophical twists of chance, its treasured legacy of quirky suspense and nostalgic whimsy established the optimal template for anthology drama in home entertainment. Scenarios often possessed revelatory endings to otherworldly eternities or damned odysseys ruining afterlife wish-fulfilment, presented in the

form of compacted morality tales with all the compelling insights their era could muster. If you fail to accurately recall episode titles like 'the one where...' you will still remember Rod Serling's perfectly judged narrations, always pithy and quotable, such as that line about "a man who carries on his shoulder a chip the size of the national debt". There's an abundance of favourites here, but particularly memorable tales include 'The Lonely' with Jean Marsh as robot companion for a convict on an asteroid prison, compulsive reader Burgess Meredith surviving the nuclear apocalypse but tragically breaking his prescription spectacles in 'Time Enough At Last', a bout of hysterical paranoia as 'The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street', and Ted Post's 'A World of Difference' (from one of Richard Matheson's many scripts) which predated *The Truman Show* by nearly 40 years. Roddy McDowall plays the first man on Mars but only ends up as a zoo exhibit in 'People Are Alike All Over', and Ralph Nelson directs Keenan Wynn as the playwright creating 'A World of His Own' with domesticated hallucinations of fictional characters brought magically to life. Remastered picture and sound is of impressive quality, and there are bundles of extra features and hours of bonus interviews. The first TV revival (1985–9) was produced off the back of Spielberg's 1983 movie and resulted in several worthwhile episodes, including a few splendid remakes of the original show's stories. A second revival in 2002, made in Canada with Forest Whitaker as the host/narrator, only lasted for one season, but was not such poor quality TV as some blinkered critics have claimed. The original *Twilight Zone – Season Two* is due on Blu-ray 16 May, and *Season Three* is scheduled for 27 June.



If you are a fan of *Bulletproof Monk*, Jean-Marie Poiré's *Les visiteurs*, Steve Miner's *Warlock*, and enjoyed Japan's recent *Kitaro* movies, then Korean fantasy **WOOCCHI – THE DEMON SLAYER** (DVD/Blu-ray, 25 April) should appeal to you. This slapstick farce and kung fu comedy is about scoundrel wizard Woochi who's "mighty and great. The people's hero. Beloved by all. Unmatched in power. Knows style and elegance, is courageous..." enough, of course, to defeat kingly tyrants and deceitful noblemen, and is "the very standard of righteousness" (even when he's drunk). Here, a lively scenario mixes ancient days and modern times to an often hilarious effect. The green-blooded rodent goblins freed from captivity can only be controlled by Archgod's magical pipe. A young widow rescued or kidnapped in the Joseon dynasty also has a doppelgänger/descendant in the present but, either way, Woochi is warned that "she will lead you to your grave". This offers knockabout adventure with high-flying swordplay, telekinetic powers, and otherworldly realms in paintings used for teleportation. Three immortals release Woochi from centuries of imprisonment in a picture and persuade him to deal with goblins' chaos which reigns upon city streets. Switching from traditional ancient Chinese fantasy to the witty magic *Matrix* of a superhero comedy this is much funnier than Peter Berg's deeply flawed *Hancock*. In its western-styled witchcraft showdown with elemental forces (fire, water, wind) deployed as weapons, *Woochi* is a clever and wryly amusing exploration of boundaries between reality and mystery, and musically inspired CGimagination, with playfully hallucinatory flights of hectically-paced fancy, and flexible philosophy in a delightful fairy-tale plot-line... However: "To shun Taoist solitude and dream of Confucian success is just a waste of a dream." So, this might all be just the godly delusions of a new psych patient in the contemporary shrink's office!



BLOOD REICH: BLOODRAYNE 3 (aka: *Bloodrayne: The Third Reich*), unleashed upon DVD, 2 May, is the latest in Uwe Boll's series of vampire action movies – each one set in a different century. *BloodRayne* (2005) starred Kristanna Loken and was rooted in 18th century Romania. Natassia Malthe took over the titular role of half-vamp Rayne for weird western *BloodRayne: Deliverance* (2007), tackling vampire cowboys in 1860s. Malthe returns here for European slaying duties against the Nazi hordes but without Hitler as uncrowned king of vampires. A missed opportunity? Yes, indeed, although a furious führer does appear in the anti-heroine's dreaming sequence (amusing to note what still gives a vampire nightmares!) and in stock footage. There's some holocaust-railway montages, 'day-walker' Rayne presents typically spectacular cleavage with her usual long black leather

coat – which is finally back in wartime fashion – and she teams up with eastern front resistance fighters to combat a whole army led by Nazi vampire Ekart (Michael Paré affects a panto German accent). It is probably inevitable that German filmmaker Boll would eventually do this movie (he's also made this year's *Auschwitz*), here adding a WW2 doctor (a wannabe Mengele), who experiments on vampires, to a behind-enemy-lines espionage/sabotage yarn. However, as expected from the much ridiculed Boll, some awful first draft scripting, with especially inept monologues and disingenuous rants, blundering direction (routine continuity errors, a Boll speciality!) that's no more thoughtful than a studio back-lot tour guide, add to laughable thespian confusions of terrible performances all round – which often seem like 'rehearsals' with actors' stand-ins than intentional role-playing. Trashonistas may snigger at softcore lesbian frolics in a brothel where Rayne saves one poor woman from a savage beating, and chortle over Gestapo Gothic interludes for Rayne's contractual swordfight display, but the very best of Boll's competence is when you can, at least, tell who is shouting at or shooting at (or knocking down or chopping up) who! As to why on earth or in hell you could possibly feel fanatically keen to watch this without coercion...that remains a complete mystery.

British actor Jason Connery (star of *Lightspeed*, *Urban Ghost Story*, TV series *Robin of Sherwood*) makes his directorial debut with **THE DEVIL'S TOMB** (DVD, 2 May), a tedious B-movie trying for an old testament blasphemy but only managing to steal its basic set-up (soldiers versus unknown biohazard) from Cameron's *Aliens*, here plot-pooled with Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*. Despite a recognisable-name cast – Cuba Gooding Jr, Taryn Manning, Valerie Cruz, Henry Rollins, Bill Moseley, plus extended cameos by Ron Perlman and Ray Winstone – only Stephanie Jacobsen (*Home & Away* graduate who played Kendra in *BSG: Razor*) makes an effective attempt at more than blandly flat characterisation, though it's not really the actors' fault as they're lumbered with an appalling script and slack direction. It is an obviously low-budget, stuck-with-one-surplus-helicopter flick, about a supposedly elite squad on a top secret mission to rescue a scientist from a middle-eastern archaeological

site, in a desert bunker, where they find no WMD, but 'something else' being covered up by the 'CIA' doctor (Cruz, reading teleprompter lines). The priest in orange blister makeup protects a reportedly terrible conspiracy of frozen angels cast down from heaven: nephilim spirits absorbed by exorcists (ah, the heroic adjutants, of course). Before you can say 'black ops duster-fuckup' victims are possessed by demons that know a bit about Hebrew scripture and spew acidic vomit along with biblical verse, or "a bunch of ancient fire and brimstone shit". Main cast suffer flashbacks to Gulf War traumas instead of actually bothering to portray inane soldiers, even the most clumsy stereotype of 'elite' seen outside of utter rubbishy Z-grade video for quite a while. Throat gouging, spine shredding, no-brain-splatter gore fades in favour of dismal psychodrama showdown concerning lost 'faith' regained; just in time for Gooding Jr to easily save the day, and fly off into the sunset alone.

Some comedians would have us believe that old jokes are the best, yet Larry Blamire's yawn fest **DARK AND STORMY NIGHT** (DVD, 9 May) is a one-joke movie delivered in fun-free packaging. While the likes of Adam Sandler, Jack Black and Chris Rock have long since cornered the market for gross inanity on screen, other alleged funny-men, from the much-hated Russell Brand to the uneven Hollywood career of Jim Carrey, continue to paint themselves into film-land corners with tragically unfunny scenarios, and hang themselves out to dry whenever appropriate lengths of mouldy old rope are available to them. Opportunist video hack Blamire makes anti-satire out of recycled subgenre material which was only amusing for its exemplary ineptitude the first time we saw it. This latest 'Blamire

thing' is far better than *Lost Skeleton of Cadavra*, but only because it's in colour. A motley bunch of stock players attend reading of a will at a country mansion, where murders occur whenever the lights go out. There is séance japery, and the evil villain has a mad scientist's lab in the cellar, of course. It's campy, hammy (not quality smoked Wiltshire, just processed meat like spam!), and cheesily amateurish. Blamire attempts to copy Mel Brooks' mocking style of humour, but this is heavily sanitised, like a Disney spoof, so there's nothing to offend the prudes. *Dark and Stormy Night* is a deathly pale, lifeless imitation of movies like Jonathan Lynn's *Cluedo* (aka: *Clue*, 1985), which, for all its faults, remains an infinitely more amusing farce than Blamire's clumsily staged and quite atrociously monotonous drivel.

Matrix agent Smith suggested humanity behaves like a virus – so, what if Gaia treated us like one? Not to be confused with Armand Mastroianni's 2007 TV mini-series opus which starred Tiffani (White Collar) Thiessen as a glam scientist stereotype, Japanese epic drama **PANDEMIC** (DVD, 9 May), directed by Takahisa Zeze (maker of weird futuristic actioner *Moon Child*), explores the somewhat illogical sci-fi horror scenario of a medical 'detective story' combined with almost mythical overtones of the nature's revenge subgenre. From a village in the Philippines where WHO doctors treat victims of a bird flu outbreak, a spate of deaths is followed to Japan where a virus reaches the outskirts of Tokyo, after a poultry farm outbreak – despite the mass slaughter of hens. Tamiflu pills and quarantine for patients fails to fight off the (H5N1?) virus, and soon the outlying city's main hospital is infected. Luckily, here's heroic WHO scientist Dr Kobayashi (Rei Dan, samurai drama *Love and Honour*) to take charge of this deadly situation, despite a frequently over-emotional supporting cast's bouts of hysteria and blatant sentimentalism – the greatest curse, along with pointless social formalities, of many Asian movies. Thankfully, such cultural asides are offset by the roundly science fictional rationality of humane containment and recognition of necessary sacrifices as typical chaotic tragedy, like *Panic in the Streets*, ensues, overcoming the familiarities of cruel-to-be-kind deeds during ICU ward episodes, when gruesome death for many feverish infectees means coughing up blood clots. While CDC research news indicates the virus is airborne (already seen via slo-mo CGI droplets!), it's not a 'new flu' strain, and a bleeding from the eyes that marks faces of the doomed as, perhaps, damned by mother nature, results in tabloid nametag 'blame' for the super-virus. Kobayashi's ex-toy-boy Dr Matsuoka (Satoshi Tsumabuki) leaps into young protagonist mode as he traces a possible source of infection to an economically ruined shrimp farm on Minas Island where something or other from bats in the jungle has afflicted one local village with the red-eye stigmatism. Not that it helps much elsewhere as smoke from funeral pyres clouds the city skyline, though there's precious little oomph to widescreen spectacle of this mock biological catastrophe when body count captions of one million dead and ten million infected fail to shock, as bland



A merciless serial killer, who is fond of beheadings and dismemberment, murders the fiancée of a security agent, and so provokes a ruthless pursuit in the Korean shocker **I SAW THE DEVIL** (Blu-ray/DVD, 9 May). Apart from some violent attacks and grisly carve-ups, this plays out like just another stalk 'n' slash thriller, with only one clever twist. Portraying the intensity of vigilante vengeance at its most formidable, the hero agent covertly inserts a tracking/listening bug in the killer, and then lets him go free for a prolonged catch-and-release hunting 'sport', during which the agent interrupts and further cruelly injures the nasty villain each time he commits another vile crime. There's a frenzied knifing in a taxi, and the attempted rape of a nurse, while director Kim Jee-woon (mystery chiller *A Tale of Two Sisters* and Manchurian 'western' *The Good, The Bad, The Weird*) cranks up both suspense and tensions, as the film grows increasingly brutal in its moods and action scenes. The killer (played by Choi Min-sik of *Oldboy* renown) finds refuge with another of his kind, but that simply invites even worse beatings than before; until the despicable killer's efforts to overturn the amoral conflict's unwritten 'rules of engagement' and regain the upper hand for a climactic showdown. This is very well made and gripping at times and yet it's about a half-hour longer than it needs to be, with far too much dialogue and over-emoting that weakens the dramatic force of its misogynistic-stalker terrors and freestyle-butcherer slashers horrors. Ultimately, *I Saw The Devil* is rather predictable, as a slightly parodic combo remix of *Taken* and *Saw* and *Seven*.

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info is pasted over a wintry urban silence. There's minimal characterisation here ("I want to stop people dying!"), and a superficially basic action, except for older virologist Prof Nishi ('Tatsuya Fujii, *Empire of the Senses, Bright Future*) who brings a graceful calm to his brief appearance and untimely death. This particular lack means that only a paltry few action scenes of civil disorder, and social collapse prompted by despair, are present as the primary disaster movie entertainment values. A trite coda – "Even if the world ends tomorrow, plant an apple tree today" – is laughable. If you have already seen Dustin Hoffman's dull heroics in Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), and/or Kinji Fukasaku's biotech apocalypse *Virus* (aka: *Fukatsu no hi*, 1980) – get the 2004 director's cut DVD of that movie and ignore the Americanised version – then Zeze's 2009 *Pandemic* with a full 138 minutes of cross-genre mystery is hardly worth sitting through. Jamie Lee Curtis, battling that comic book styled alien threat in *Virus* (1999) was a lot more fun. And the low-budget end-of-the-world road movie *Carriers* (2009), well co-directed by brothers David and Alex Pastor, is far more actively engaging as horrific SF drama.



Nowadays, too many movies are so formulaic that spoilers have become ineffective. A few key phrases in a review cannot possibly damage a DVD's rental or retail prospects if the story lacks any genuine surprises anyway. There has also been quite significant erosion to the once fine 'art' of making appealing trailers. Whether it's promotion for some cheap indie slasher, or (equally exploitative?) a US blockbuster, most trailers do not bother with dropping hints, they include all their money shots, fitted as standard to a product sampler. This means, inevitably, that full viewing of the complete feature is unsatisfactory, and a disappointing experience because we may have, quite literally in many cases, already seen all of the 'best bits', if not every scene worth highlighting. Stacy Davidson directs shock-horror **SWEATSHOP** (DVD, 9

May) to ensure that it is the sort of generic filmmaking that's best appreciated by its trailer alone. The feature merely resembles an unedited version of its advert, like raw footage with all the most boring bits (and there are many of them) left in, as padding, to stretch a short film to feature length. During this editorial stretching process, there comes a crucial point at which natural 'narrative elasticity' breaks. Unfortunately, though, *Sweatshop* just carries on regardless, long after the echoing twang of its snapped storyline has faded away into ambient noise. Then, oops, its knickers fall down. Enough metaphorising... *Sweatshop* is about punky pals setting up an illicit rave in a disused factory. Luckily, there's a monstrously deformed spree killer in residence to spoil their fun and frolics. It's a completely uninvolved plot with a clutch of unpleasant or plainly obnoxious characters, mostly better off dead and the sooner the better for testing the tolerance of horror fans. Excited? You probably won't be. In horror flicks, how embarrassingly crude is that have-sex-and-die cliché? Today, that's not just lazy filmmaking, lacking a scrap of imagination or genre wit, it's actually rather insulting to viewers too.



Created for TV by Frank Darabont, **THE WALKING DEAD** (Blu-ray/DVD, 16 May) is a US mini-series of six episodes based on Eisner award-winning graphic novels written by Robert Kirkman. When it begins with a little girl being shot in the head by a cop at the scene of a car accident, we may reasonably imagine/suppose this is a horror story that won't pull any punches but, unfortunately, the programme makers are much less interested in genre content and more concerned, overall, with soap opera narrative in a post-apocalypse scenario. It's not really demanding to know 'what the hell is going on?' or asking 'what just happened?', it's only wondering 'do ya wanna talk about it?' This is, perhaps, only to be expected when the show's concept has to be sold to media execs as a long-form drama with wide appeal to many TV viewers that are not genre-literate. Nevertheless, injecting any soap opera routines into a zombie

nightmare does diminish the impact of a considerably unpleasant scenario, and lessen entertainment prospects for most horror fans raised on Romero epics. Like the protagonists of *Day of the Triffids* and *28 Days Later*, deputy sheriff Rick (British telly actor Andrew Lincoln, *This Life*) wakes up all alone in hospital to find that meat flies have already descended on corpses strewn around the car park. Following a leisurely stopover at home, our hero rides on horseback into Atlanta, where he hopes to find the refugees' camp that his wife and kid were headed for, but he only manages to get stuck inside a tank, abandoned on the city street, while a multitude of zombies eat his horse. That was episode one. As trigger-happy Merle, Michael Rooker brings some much needed redneck belligerence to the nice guys 'R' us supporting cast in the following episodes, while 'camouflage gore' to evade zombies picking up a scent of living flesh is the main gruesome addition to the subgenre's existing catalogue of pretending-to-be-undead techniques, but when Rick finds his wife Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies, of *Prison Break*) and young son safe with a diverse group of survivors, domestic arguments and bland campfire tales are deployed to

fill time until halfway point, when the caravan/convoys depart for CDC, where they hope to find some medical help (if not a cure), and safety for their families away from constant risk of infection. Lonesome Dr Jenner keeps his video log of research failures in the underground complex but, if wrenching despair of accepting extinction wasn't challenging enough, there's also a countdown to fiery self-destruction while everybody's locked inside the base... Horror, by its nature, needs to disgust and offend. Simply causing alarm or terror is not sufficient. All the pessimism and lingering grief, nagging regrets, burning jealousies, infidelity or broken promises, hard choices and fighting chances found in this TV serial do not qualify as horror. The story is much too long-winded and flagrantly dull compared to Zack Snyder's notable *Dawn of the Dead* remake and, as quite the best of more recent zombie action flicks, *Resident Evil: Afterlife* is certainly ten tons more fun despite being basically imitative and self-reverential. Even average genre road movie *Zombieland* was better than *The Walking Dead*. As for a second season of this TV disaster-soap... shoot it in the head, please. Nuke its timeslot from orbit. (It's the only way to be sure.)



THE FRANKENSTEIN

EXPERIMENT (aka: *The Frankenstein Syndrome*), lurching onto DVD, 16 May, directed by Sean Tretta (faux documentary *Death of a Ghost Hunter*, 2007), claims Mary Shelley's 'modern Prometheus' as its inspiration, but then so did Andy Warhol,

Mel Brooks, Roger Corman, Hammer Films, Universal Pictures, and a great many others harking back to James Whale, none of which were very faithful to the book either. Tretta's painfully low budget production mirrors the scientifically updated scenario of Jed Mercurio's sadly lacklustre TV movie *Frankenstein* (2007), but fails to balance its casting of Ed Lauter (in a sit-down role) and Louis Mandylor (homicidal executive) with scream queen Tiffany Shepis – here playing a pioneering medical doctor who's recruited by an illegal stem-cell research lab. Scientist 'heroes' gathered there are abusing human prisoners as donors to create a "universal healing serum" which can restart a dead heart, beating all on its own in a specimen tray. Yes, if this sounds like *Re-Animator*, it's because it is – but without a sense of humour! Of course, their experiments go wrong, turning one poor woman into a vicious 'creature' immune to sedation, and culminate in the inadvertent creation of superhuman David with psychic powers of telepathy and mind-over-matter.

Throw in David's vocation as the secret lab's top security guard who indulges in cage-fighting matches, and Tretta's film is a fix of amoral brutality examined on

various levels. However, this mélange of SF ideas and horror scenes does not end there because mutated David could be either the ungodly messiah or an invincible antichrist... Sci-fi concepts are manhandled into place without much thought for story logic. If the bad scripting is, just occasionally, intriguing as SF, the talky acting is uniformly weak, direction is acutely flawed, and the production values are wholly inadequate from start to finish. Framing the plot as a string of flashbacks in a survivor's account given to FBI investigators, two years on, is hardly conducive to generating any tension and maintains no suspense whatsoever. It's a shame when imaginative reach exceeds creative grasp, and a genre filmmaker's vaulting ambition fails to be realised because of a simple lack of resources. This is yet another movie project that probably looked exciting on paper, but on the screen it's a terrible mess of blatant clichés, budget gore and absurd mise en scène, that struggles to hide its numerous faults, many of which are reminiscent of 1980s' direct-to-video sci-fi splatter. Don't bother with this crudely malformed effort. See Vincenzo Natali's vastly superior *Splice* instead.

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MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

SOURCE CODE

THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU

SUCKER PUNCH

LIMITLESS

RED RIDING HOOD

BEASTLY

YOUR HIGNESS

MARS NEEDS MOMS

BATTLE: LOS ANGELES

THE EXTRAORDINARY
ADVENTURES OF
ADÈLE BLANC-SEC

THOR



In this box is a cake. You can have the cake if you don't eat it. But to eat the cake you have to open the box, and also in the box is a cat strapped to a bomb. The cat may or may not have eaten the cake. You won't know till you open the box. If it has,

it'll probably be sick, but that's neither here nor there, though it may be both at once. Now: what if I told you that we have devised a technology that will allow you to have your cake *and* eat it, while leaving the cat entirely unharmed and at



The long-wrangled rights to *Ubik* itself have now been settled on Michel Gondry, even if it's probably wishful to imagine that such a heaven-made match will actually make it to the altar; and the matchmaker in the sky has been Electric Shepherd Productions, the company set up by Dick's daughters during the making of *A Scanner Darkly* to manage the increasingly busy business of licensing PKD's works to film and comics. Now the good Shepherdesses have their first ESP-branded project in **THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU**, which credits Isa Dick Hackett among its producers, and adapts one of the less remembered keynote stories from the astonishing amphetamine winter of 1952 that was bookended by 'Second Variety' and 'Impostor' (the next story he'd write after 'Adjustment Team'), and during which Dick was discovering week by week the

themes that would define his vision and voice and dominate the rest of his career. If the Dick family's involvement raises expectations of another *Scanner Darkly*, these quickly adjust downwards in a regression to the Hollywood-PKD mean, with the spine of Dick's story transplanted into an unrecognisably different body for the by now obligatory chase-movie main event. A few recognisable moments from the story remain in the first act, but largely disconnected from the body of the film on to which they're grafted; the Adjustment effect itself is never seen again, and though Dick's own ending was fairly weak and perfunctory it's a shame that the strength of the premise is dissipated so early.

Much of the point of Dick's story lies in the fact that the hero and his wife, who stumble on the revelation that reality and our memories of it are constantly being

the same time blown to tiny smithereens? No no, you don't get to look inside. You are an instrument in the war against the totalitarianism of narrative determinacy. Your mission is to enter the box, defuse the bomb, save the cat, eat the cake, and return to the same reality that you left with cake and cat intact. Good luck, captain. (He's got to be braindead to buy this stuff, you know. What, this red light here? Oops.)

Hollywood's mainstream embrace of layered and branching narrative is now so deeply incepted that it's breaking out of the dream state all over. Most of these films are effectively uncredited adaptations of either *Rogue Moon* or *Ubik*, so **SOURCE CODE** at least scores an innovation by being both at once – combining the former's gamelike challenges and iterable narrative lives with the latter's search for the reality behind the layers of waking dream in a space

between life and death. Jake Gyllenhaal's downed Afghan pilot wakes up as a stranger on a train that blows up in a time-loop every eight minutes (down from a more leisurely seventeen in the early drafts), and finds himself charged by his remote handlers with fingering the bomber before he strikes again. Alas, Jake is badly untrained in the ways of even military intelligence, and takes an inordinate time to twig what the audience has spotted from the first iteration about where to look for the terrorist. But it spins him more time to speed-woo his groundhog date Michelle Monaghan, pursue his own side investigation into the project and personnel that have put him there, and work through his dreary issues with his father in the moments of downtime. Ben Ripley's spec was a famous script before it was even in production, making

the 2007 Black List of then-unproduced screenplays, and two years later topping the ScriptShadow reader's poll by a huge margin, far ahead of such also-rans as *The Social Network*; but it was frankly a little hard to see why. Behind the nonsensical title is a solid enough narrative gimmick but some irreparably inept plotting, machine-tooled characters and motivation, and a mumbled scientific rationale ("It's very complicated: quantum mechanics, parabolic calculus...") so fatuous that it pretty much wrecks all the various attempts at an ending then and since, including the saggy triple-decker in Duncan Jones' eventual film. But what it does do is to contrive a narrative finesse that allows the internal rules to be simultaneously preserved (and indeed to set up a sequel) and comprehensively shattered into the happy-ever-after. Cake for everyone.

recalibrated by shadowy metaphysical operatives, are suburban nobodies, tiny cogs in a vast machinery of geopolitical purpose. But this won't wash in Hollywood's decidedly more aspirational heroic cosmos, so Matt Damon's character is now a future US President, no less, driven by a chronic unfulfillment that will be derailed if he finds happiness with Emily Blunt's stardom-bound dancer. ("Are you going to run again?" he's asked after an early setback; and the poster reassures us that yes, there's going to be an *awful* lot of running before this film is done. Mind you, it also assures us that Blunt will be working up sweat in an eye-commanding red dress, but this turns out to be made of Photoshop by top virtual couturiers Sir Ving, Sir Gestion, and Sir Not Appearing in This Film.) So the angelic agents of The Chairman ("That's just the name we use; he has many others") throw discreet spanners in the machinery of causality to keep the script's development on track, before Matt finally rebels after several years of this stuff and grabs her by the wrist for a protracted portal-jumping race to the top of everything. The trouble with all this as a chase-movie setup is that the antagonists are the painfully well-meaning agents of a benign deity, which not only disqualifies them from doing any of the actually nasty things that forces of pursuit in movies are normally expected to threaten, but leaves you wondering why The Chairman (who worryingly gets a personal thanks in the credits) didn't think of the distinctly bathetic ending six years sooner.



Zack Snyder's **SUCKER PUNCH** manages to engineer its own trainwreck every eight minutes with an utterly ghastly tale of abused girls in a grotesque asylum escaping into a multi-layered fantasy of adolescent dreams where the patients become hookers in a whorehouse and Emily Browning dances them into a series of action sequences to steal the props they need for her frankly rubbish breakout plan. (One of these involves being dropped into a hijacked train to deactivate a bomb against the clock. Someone could do a whole film of that.) It's all an eyebusting showcase for Snyder's trademark skills of digital worldsculpting and stunning fantasy wirework, but unfortunately also for his yawning deficiencies in taste, storytelling, and grown-up imagination. The nested layers of greenscreen dreams subject Browning and her celebrity teammates (including Abbie Cornish, Vanessa Hudgens, and Jena Malone) to a catwalk parade of horrible fetish outfits

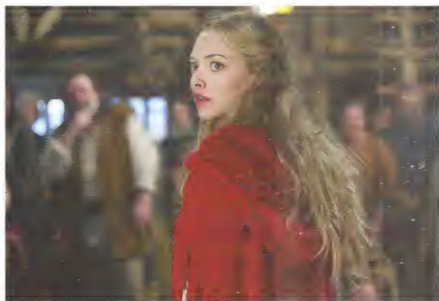
in which they look as miserable as their characters are. Snyder and his co-writer steer wisely away from dialogue, but not hard enough to save us from mystery angel Scott Glen's repertoire of doped fortune-cookie aphorisms like "If you don't stand for something you'll fall for anything" and "Don't ever write a check with your mouth you can't cash with your ass". It looks amazing, as you'd imagine, and is clearly trying to push the envelope of Hollywood narrative with its triple rabbit-hole of dreams; its incorporation into long-form filmmaking of song-led narrative techniques from music video, and task-led level-plotting from gaming; its squirmingly uncomfortable and anti-erotic deconstruction of the marketing of young female product; the audaciously athletic genre-hopping of its inset dreams; and the unrelenting darkness of its *Brazil*-homaging journey to ending. In the best sense, it's a terrible film. But also in the worst.



Much the most effectively Dickensian film of the season is Neil Burger's **LIMITLESS**, in which Bradley Cooper's blocked sf novelist inherits a dead dealer's stash of wonder pills that make him superintelligent, only to find that the side effects both pharmaceutical and criminal threaten to outpace his ability to outsmart them. Pleasingly, it's a writer's film through, through, and through. Fed up with two decades of typecasting as a contractor of light romantic date pictures – including *Just Like Heaven*, the chick flick *Ubik* – screenwriter Leslie Dixon found Irish novelist Alan Glynn's debut *The Dark Fields* in a second-hand bookshop, duped

the rights out of Harvey Weinstein, and steered the production herself through a series of writer's nightmares, from the loss of original lead Heath Ledger, to a last-minute change of ending to accommodate the late casting of Robert de Niro in what had been a small supporting role, and continuing adjustments to the voiceover narration up to the very eve of release. It's come out of it all surprisingly well. The original ending followed the book in revealing the hero to have been a puppet of the shadowy drugmaker all along, but Dixon's eve-of-shoot rethink has actually made for a more thoughtful, rewarding, and ambivalent resolution, albeit at the cost of leaving dangling some of the plotlines that no longer have a job to do in the final version. Burger's direction does a wonderful job of evoking Cooper's in-head experience of IQ rush and all-round superenhanced cognitive performance, and it's hard to imagine anyone doing a better job than Cooper of the character's rise and fall from dishevelled disappointment

to pin-sharp human smartbomb before the spiralling loss of control over mind, body, and world. The main problem is that it's just not clever enough for its premise. The challenge in building a thriller plot around enhanced intelligence is that the writer-hero needs constantly to be smarter than the audience; and for a supergenius, Cooper's character proves as dismally slow as *Source Code*'s hero to think about things that have been screaming themselves hoarse at the audience from the very start. A lot of the awkwardness in plotting is actually the fault of overfidelity to the book, and the net effect is the not unwelcome one of ramping up the suspense to often terrific levels as the audience sees the various story bullets converging on the hero like a slo-mo train disaster. But a film that sets out to play chess with your head needs to have a very good game to outplay the audience's look-ahead down all the pathways of possibility, and it's only at the end that *Limitless* is forced, too late, to break out from playing by the book.



The audience's sense of the multiple narrative pathways in source material is also an important engine of effect in the emerging genre of live-action dark fairytale. Heading the intimidating charge is Catherine Hardwicke's own **RED RIDING HOOD**, her first film since the original *Twilight*, which seeks to rejuvenate the werewolf picture by interbreeding with a familiar strain of star-crossed dark teen romance and some rather forced intertextuality with Perrault and Grimm. Amanda Seyfried

is the village red-hottie somewhere in the American Middle Ages torn between her woodcutter sweetheart and the posh blacksmith's son to whom she's unwillingly betrothed, until the vengeful resurgence of a local lycanthrope rips the skin off some old familial secrets in the close-knit community. So which path through the woods will the story take? Will the killer in sheep's clothing prove to be Red herself (nope; ruled out disappointingly early), Julie Christie as her witchy granny, guilt-hugging mom Virginia Madsen,

sozzled *Twilight*-vet dad Billy Burke, one or both of her suitors, her special-needs brother, Gary Oldman's sinister inquisitor, or the Lukas Haas character who seems to have so mysteriously little to do with anything? "A creature this powerful must come from a long and uninterrupted bloodline," hints Oldman. "Look for the signs: isolation, witchcraft, the black arts, abnormal behaviour, strange smells..." As usual, you can think of several cooler twists than the available pool of suspects: did Goldman really kill his wolfy wife? what about his mysterious daughters, never seen again? has someone been making new werewolves as red herrings? Sadly, none of these is a spoiler, and when the eventual unmasking comes its thumping unsurprise is accompanied by what can only be described as a Dumbledore speech; while as an early harbinger of *Twilight*-inspired fairytale it has disappointingly little to say or think about adolescent sexuality, only going fully Twi in the coda (which caused its own controversy when the tie-in novelisation held the chapter in question back till the film's release). It's also weirdly studded with moments of abrupt surrealism, including some bizarre business with iron masks, thumb pianos, and the standout line "Lock him up – in the elephant!" There are a lot more of these films on the way, though, so safest to pull hood up tight and stick to the path.



Grimmer still is **BEASTLY**, from YA veteran Alex Flinn's novel repotting Villeneuve's roseate fable in present-day Manhattan high school, with Alex Pettyfer's pampered Adonis put under a special-makeup curse after he's beastly to school witch Mary-Kate Olsen, and has to captivate scholarship chick Vanessa Hudgens to redeem himself. Flinn herself

expended a lot of ingenuity on cramming the novel with modern-dress counterparts of key elements from the traditional versions, but without managing to make the whole endeavour any the less creepy and repellent. The film version has done what it can, eliminating the magic mirror universal webcam, and moving bits of the plot around to try and take the edge off the pimping of daughters, forced sexual imprisonment, and Stockholm syndrome fantasies. But trying to tell the story from the Beast's point of view – the USP of the novel, and still the focus of the film despite the more bankable Hudgens' higher billing – requires you to put yourself sympathetically in the head of a narcissistic sociopath whose redemption is ultimately that of Phil Garrido in the arms of Jaycee Lee Dugard. That neither the novel nor the film even begins to make the hero's pre-benedicted voice and motivation believable is probably a sign that their authors are in normal mental health. But it's a particular problem for a film that seeks to lure the *Twilight* fan into its vehicle that it ends up being a celebration of the rights of men to command and expect love from the girls whose lives they crush.



The major box-office trainwreck of the season has been Simon Wells' 3D mocop spectacle of Berke Breathed's picture-book **MARS NEEDS MOMS**, which digitally juvenates Seth Green into a helium-voiced ten-year-old who stows away when mom Joan Cusack is abducted by Martian gynocrats who want to suck out her parenting skills and implant them in a single-use robot nanny. Technically, it's an incremental improvement on producer Robert Zemeckis' own earlier exercises in the idiom, with the eyes now near enough to acceptable for the dialogue to feel able to risk a few tentative zombie jokes. Wells himself, who also co-wrote with wife Wendy, is the great-grandson of H.G., a trivium heavily used in the promotion of his live-action outing *The Time Machine*, and it's mildly piquant to see the Wellses following the tripods back to a socialist Mars whose totalitarian architecture and discipline are sustained by relegating males



to Morlockhood in the trash basement of a gleaming machine state. The thumpingly unWellsian message is that the state is the enemy of the family ("We were not meant to be raised by machines! We were meant to be raised by families!") and empowering women involves the denial of motherhood and the literal emasculation of society in defiance of all that moms are designed by nature to do: "She feeds me, she washes my clothes, she vacuums the house, she tucks me in at night ... She takes me to Disneyland and she reads to me and she puts bandages on my cuts." (Yes, this is a Disney picture.) It's also a deeply upsetting and manipulative film for the young audience it targets, some of the small children behind me were in absolute floods. Perhaps if it hadn't cost so prodigiously much to make, it might not have done the damage it has to Zemeckis' future plans for his art; but it's hard to feel it deserved any better.

Fairytale archetypes are hauled in to the stoner age in **YOUR HIGHNESS**, an unapologetically silly spoof of early-80s sword & sorcery films, with Danny McBride's slacker princeling forced to go questing with exasperatingly flawless and heroic big brother James Franco to rescue his princess bride from evil sorcerer Justin Theroux (who amuses himself by pulling the wings off fairies before crushing their bodies and snorting up the powder). Uniformly weak jokes and a hefty packload of dispiriting sibling/father character baggage are offset by a real affection for the original genre, inspired location use of County Antrim, and some grudgingly irresistible improv deadpanning from Franco and, particularly, Natalie Portman's tinily lethal warrior maiden. (Of her drive for revenge: "It's been burning in my beaver since the day my brothers were killed.") The original films were generally funnier than this – I've never heard a packed full house laugh as long and as hard as at the first release of *Hawk the Slayer* – but what it misses in comic killing power it makes up in often unsettlingly spot-on recreation of a pivotal but largely uncelebrated moment in fantasy cinema's rise to acceptance.



More untroubledly Wellsian is **BATTLE: LOS ANGELES**, the straightforward alien-invasion picture whose lead FX unit, the brothers Strause's hy'drau'lx, disputatiously went off and made their own preemptive cheapie *Skyline* on the side, with all the winkiness and genre-pumping jollity that this main feature so earnestly eschews. In a year that sees alien invaders pitted against cowboys, hoodies, *Skyline*'s slackers and *Monsters*' border refugees, this one irony-resistant strain of the virus now offers us *Aliens vs Green Berets*. Aaron Eckhardt gives his all in trying to make a serious dramatic role out of his guilt-haunted veteran ("I survived. I wasn't supposed to") leading a squad of marines on a rescue mission into occupied LA, only to find themselves cut off on the frontline

and forced to go it alone on a guerrilla counteroffensive. Much prologue work has gone into creating some sense of character for the disposable team members, as we see them in turn Skype family, plan weddings, visit shrinks, kiss pregnancy bumps, and sign retirement papers, but it all rather dissipates once they get in uniform and the action goes all handheld. Its gritty *Hurt Locker* take on rapid dominance makes it an interesting film to arrive in the spring of Libya and Abbottabad, and initially the alien incursions seem to have the upper hand; but humanity's resistance has two killer assets. One is the arrival in the film of Michelle Rodriguez, at which point ET might as well go home there and then; the other is the aliens' ability to master interstellar travel but not cloud networking, leaving them with one of those primitively centralised command-and-control systems that enable the entire invasion force to be decapitated with a single well-targeted explosion. "That was some real John Wayne shit, staff sergeant." Gets 'em every time.



The original belle époque of scientific romance comes to life in Luc Besson's **THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF ADELE BLANC-SEC**, which adapts the first of Jacques Tardi's long-running BD series about an intrepid lady novelist turned paranormal investigator in the years before and after WWI. Louise Bourgoignie incarnates Tardi's droll and dauntless heroine with a bit more sexual ping than her graphics version, in a lavishly mounted

imbroglio taking in an escaped pterodactyl, Ramses II's personal nuclear physicist, and a quest to undo the tragic consequences of a freak tennis accident. The challenge of Tardi's material is that his series has been going since the mid-seventies, and many of its original charms have since become commonplaces of steampunk and period adventure, most familiarly in Indiana Jones, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and the *Mummy* films – whose heroine is essentially a Hollywood version of Adèle, hobbled and domesticated with all the tiresome romantic baggage that Tardi's character so refreshingly disdains. Every character actor in the *Republique* seems to have been requisitioned and plastered with an outlandish moustache, and the books' beguiling sense of period setting finds a well-made match in yet another of Besson's visual love letters to the Parisian cityscape. Look out for a deleted sequence in the end credits, though *Your Highness* manages to trump this by including one in its main titles.



But the season's biggest comics adaptation is also its boldest exercise in universe-building. As the last and first of the Avengers assemble for Marvel's mightiest movie mission, **THOR** is charged with the heaviest hammer-lifting of all. Even the *Galactus* film only dallied briefly with the cosmic vastnesses of the major superhero universes, and the centrality of big science-fictional images and woad to Jack Kirby's defining vision of what

superhero comics would become for the next fifty years. Unexpectedly, comics ingenue Kenneth Branagh's screen version is far and away the most hardcore and out-there of the Marvel Studios films, teetering on the brink of utter madness in a way that faithfully recalls the wildness of Kirby's silver-age peak. *Thor*, the only title other than *Fantastic Four* that Kirby drew continuously till his defection to DC in 1970, was at once the most Kirbysque of Kirby and the showground supreme for Stan Lee's most inimitable dialogue writing, itself a body of American poetry as significant in its way and era as the voices of Dylan and Burroughs even if it's been sensibly judged unspeakable for the actual film. Possibly out of nervousness over potential offence to monotheists, pagans, Nordic Americans, and any other interest groups who might be minded to take arms, the film version of the character invokes Arthur C. Clarke on magic and science to backpedal on all the divinity stuff in favour of a more fully science-fictional interpretation of the character than has ever quite been the case in comics canon. The Nine Realms are simply planets, the Rainbow Bridge a wormhole gateway: "an Einstein-Rosen bridge", as the newly boffinised Jane Foster excitedly explains (Podolsky being apparently not snappy enough to share credit), and Mjolnir "forged in the heart of a dying star" (as

was everything else, you might think, but let's not spoil the rhetorical moment). Neither *Thor* nor his hammer transforms at all, and Dr Don Blake is banished from the continuum except as a stolen ID card – not entirely unfairly, as Kirby and Lee decided late in their run that he'd never really existed anyway, but it's still rather a startling jump, particularly as Jane is now promoted to a doctorate in his place, and there's even a nod across the Marvel multiverse to the Ultimate continuum, in which nobody believes our hero's protestations of godhead. As a film, it's all rather untidy, spending far too long a middle hanging out in New Mexico diners, and with a wearisome *Your Highness*-style triangle of brothers and father that completely fails to nail the spirit of mischief that's supposed to define the character of Loki; while the 3D conversion looks horrible, the loss of luminance reducing Jotunheim to murk and even the glaringly contrastive desert sky to a foggy day in Plymouth. But it just about holds the bridge with its ravishingly Kirbysque production and creature design, and Chris Hemsworth's massively underappreciated vocal performance, his Scandinavian English accent delivered in a ridiculous velvety bass that you could listen to till you drift off into the Odinsleep between dreamland and death. We seem to be headed there anyway.

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